



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>





NCW
Seymour, E





1



100-100000





INTRUSION



INTRUSION





*Notes
1/26/32
W. S.*

INTRUSION

BY
BEATRICE KEAN SEYMOUR
AUTHOR OF "INVISIBLE TIDES"

7

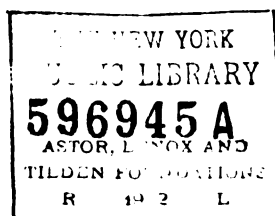


NEW YORK
PUBLIC
LIBRARY

NEW YORK
THOMAS SELTZER

1922.
CB





**COPYRIGHT, 1922, BY
THOMAS SELTZER, INC.**

All rights reserved

XROY WEN
01.004
V.1.001

Printed in the United States of America

**TO
MY BROTHER
FRANK MORTON STAPLETON
IN MEMORIAM**



CONTENTS

PAGE

PROLOGUE	.	.	.	.	.	.	I
BOOK I	.	.	.	.	.	.	3
BOOK II	.	.	.	.	.	.	128
BOOK III	.	.	.	.	.	.	235
EPILOGUE	.	.	.	.	.	.	335

PROLOGUE

IT was on an afternoon in October that they saw her first, and to Guen Suffield that fact alone might well have made the day memorable, even if there had not been about it some special quality of memorableness that made her see it, long afterwards, in the vivid way she did—as though it has been etched into her mind, ineffaceably, like a drawing in copper.

The morning had dawned wild and wet, but later, when some of its wildness had left it, you saw the new day as Autumn's own—a little wistful in spirit, but exquisitely dressed in green and gold, hung about with deep blue shadows and veiled, every now and then, by the silver mist of the fine-driving rain. If you looked closely you could almost see Autumn slipping a little deeper into the embrace of Winter, her sombre lover. . . .

That, somehow, was how the day stayed, coloured and wistful and reluctant, in Guen Suffield's mind.

And yet this is not Guen's story. . . . It is true, however, that she is inextricably mixed up with the telling of it, since, but for her, neither Allan nor Caryl would ever have seen Roberta, whose story this really is.

That, at least, was what Guen always contended, which was why, after the thing happened, there were times when she felt worse about it than anybody else: worse than Allan, worse, possibly, than Caryl, both of whom it so much more closely concerned. One thing was certain. The thread of Allan's misery there, at the end, was snapped suddenly by the sight of Caryl's and by something else which doesn't, properly, belong to this story. . . .

Guen, Caryl and Allan. Concerned as closely as these three there was a fourth. Difficult to say how much he suffered—or how long. Perhaps Caryl knew—but Caryl never said. She was too deeply occupied in pretending that the thing had never happened at all. She wanted everybody to know that

it hadn't crushed her. She couldn't bear any of them to think her wound was mortal. You couldn't look at her without realising that she, at least, was convinced it was not.

Yet it was always Caryl who stood in the way of the easy conclusion that Fate had been kind. Even though you knew the roots of her happiness went so deeply you must kill her to destroy them: even though you knew there was some little bit of herself she held always impregnable; though you realised that, for Caryl, there would always be something left.

Certainly Guen never doubted that Fate had been kind to Roberta. "The best thing that could have happened to her!" she said afterwards and with utter dispassion to Tony Gore, who didn't agree with her. But he couldn't shake her conviction. She was quite certain Fate might have done so much worse for them all—even for Roberta. *Even* for Roberta. She put it like that, remembering that Roberta had walked in beauty like the night. . . .

Whatever else Guen and Allan forgot it wasn't likely they would forget that. You don't forget beauty as unequivocal as Roberta's. When you'd stripped her of everything else—all the things you hated and despised and despaired of—the beauty remained. They saw it always, Guen and Allan, as a vivid, enduring thing—like dawn and sunset and the golden noon.

Heaven only knows how Caryl saw it. When you felt best about it you hoped she didn't see it at all; that she had wiped out Roberta's beauty as she had wiped out Roberta's sin.

INTRUSION

BOOK I

CHAPTER ONE

I

THE whole house was full of Jan's ragtime. Played with a maddening precision it floated up to Guen in her study and offered yet another argument against her attempt to work. Every now and then the syncopated notes came ludicrously muted by the soft pedal, as though Jan remembered that his sister had gone upstairs to work or that his mother dozed on the Chesterfield. Guen frowned at the ragtime but she endured it, because, somehow, one always did "endure" things from Jan—even Guen who saw through him, perhaps, more than anybody else.

Besides, it wasn't only the ragtime. There was the rain, and the noise of the river falling over the lock; the sound of hurrying feet; the rustling of leaves on a futurist lawn, and, every now and then, the bright laugh of a girl out there somewhere on the towing-path that ran, like a brown streak, beyond the green of the garden gate. And also there was the garden itself, the one really beautiful thing about this old stone house at Teddington which the Suffield family had taken two years before to escape the air raids. From the centre of the lawn a cedar rose proudly, outlined blackly against the changeable autumn sky. In the broad borders Michaelmas daisies and marguerites were growing, beaten and flat to-day beneath the heavy showers; bronze and tawny chrysanthemums bloomed

in loose and wilful bunches in the flower-beds, stabbed here and there by the red-gold of the tritoma plant that stood stiff and straight in unyielding defiance of the sheeted rain—like the spear of some old god of the sun. At the foot of the garden a black semi-circle in the far corner was a summer-house, old and dilapidated, that Guen had wanted to write in but which she had given up in despair, because it harboured draughts and weird insects and protected you neither from the wind nor the rain. Beyond the summer-house, a little wooden gate, just latched, not bolted; beyond that the towing-path and beyond that again, the river—puckered and dimpled, this afternoon, by the rain.

But it was certainly the laugh of the girl down there on the towing-path that came chiefly between Guen and her work, because it was somehow incredible that here in October, nineteen-eighteen, there could possibly be anyone left who could laugh like that—as though there had been no four years' slaughter of youth and the merriment that belongs to it. Even now, with peace in the air and its messengers on the way, Guen could not think, untouched, of the past four years. The Suffields, it is true, had come out of the war practically unscathed, but for Guen, as for all imaginative people, the war was much more than a family affair. It was a thing which had bitten right down to the heart of things, so that nothing could ever be quite the same again. There in August, nineteen-fourteen, some little part of you had died—the part that had laughed as that girl on the towing-path laughed. Not to this world, at least, would there ever be any resurrection. . . .

Suddenly, as Guen looked down upon the garden and remembered these things, the girl who had laughed stepped through the gate and like a thread of bright colour came running towards the summer-house across the futurist lawn. Following her came a young man in uniform, only more slowly, and rather as if he disliked the whole adventure and mistrusted the *bonâ-fides* of the summer-house.

They disappeared, but to the other distractions of the afternoon was added now the noise of the garden gate as, insecurely fastened, it swung open and hurled itself to and fro in helpless indignation, as if it understood that the refugees in the summer-house were going to ignore it. Guen pushed back her papers and reflected that the obvious and human thing to do

was to ask them into the house, for that girl, ridiculously clad, must already be wet to the skin. And, in any case, this was no afternoon for work. Happily there would be others. She locked away her manuscript, pocketed the key, and went downstairs. And all the way Jan's music rushed out at her and smote her, and she thought, "I *hate* ragtime. . . . I wonder why?" Afterwards, when her thoughts travelled back to this afternoon it was Jan's ragtime that affected her most. Always it was a twisting sword, unendurable, because . . . never again would she hear it.

2

In the drawing-room nobody had heard or seen anything at all. In there, with Jan at the piano, life lapsed gently by—a syncopated prelude to afternoon tea. Mrs. Suffield slept peacefully and beautifully on the Chesterfield, for she was still pretty at fifty-two. Leader, Jan's dog, with his nose up against the warm fender, behaved as though he slept, too, though the look he bent upon Guen as she entered said plainly that sleep was impossible while his master continued to make that queer noise on the black box in the corner. But at Guen's instigation the queer noise ceased, and Jan went out on to the doorstep and invited the couple in the summer-house to come in. The couple in the summer-house, however, did not rush to accept the offer. A head and a pair of uniformed shoulders appeared round the edge of the summer-house, and the owner of them replied that he thought they were all right there, thanks very much. He sounded stiff and indifferent, ungrateful, even. Guen thought Jan had better have another shot.

"You'll find it a good deal drier in here, you know. You'd better try it," he shouted.

The head and shoulders disappeared. There was a murmur of conversation, that pretty laugh again, a flash of green and gold-red and white on the lawn, and a slim damp figure landed itself there on the doorstep at Jan's side.

"Thanks awfully," said a charming voice. "Isn't it a *hell* of a day?"

"Quite," said Jan. But he blinked—not because of her language, to which he was used, but because of her beauty, to which even Jan was not.

They were certainly very wet, and Mrs. Suffield, rising up from the Chesterfield, eyed them with undisguised concern, seeing in them already, perhaps, two more victims of the influenza epidemic. So Guen took the girl upstairs and found her some dry clothes of her own, and the young man in uniform followed Jan upon a similar errand. He went, Mrs. Suffield thought, as one who lodged a protest, as though, even now, he was meditating flight. She was a kind woman, and putting it down to shyness was instantly sorry for him, for shyness, so her children had many times told her, was a dreadful handicap in life.

But Anne Suffield was wasting her sympathy, as, five minutes later, Jan could have told her if he had thought it was the sort of thing she would have liked to hear or the sort of thing mothers should be told. However, by the time he came downstairs Mrs. Suffield had gone off to hurry forward the pleasant meal of tea, and there was nobody in the drawing-room but Guen, who was making a good deal of noise with the poker in the interest of a moribund fire. Jan shut the door with emphasis, and with equal emphasis remarked that he was damned.

"Why?" asked Guen, but she stopped making the noise with the poker and sat back on her heels and looked at him.

"My dear old thing, he doesn't even know her name. He picked her up half an hour ago, outside our garden-gate."

And Jan laughed. He didn't himself "pick girls up." He was too fastidious for that: but there were other ways of accomplishing the same result, and Jan was master of them all.

"How do you know?" Guen asked.

"He told me so. Said he thought he owed it to us. . . . What rot! Besides, what a mean skunk to give a girl away like that."

If Jan hadn't "picked a girl up" in his life, neither had he ever given a girl "away." One was risky and the other cad-dish. Jan's code of honour might be a queer thing, and limited: but within those limits it was certainly rigid.

Guen smiled. She could see that, in Jan's opinion, young Ancell, for that seemed to be his name, had bungled the whole business. He had had half an hour, anyhow, in which to discover the girl's name. He was not only a skunk, but a fool. Guen recognised, of course, that no man has any right

to be both, but she felt a certain amount of sympathy, all the same, with young Ancell. For neither had *she* discovered the name of this girl. True, she had only had three minutes to his half-hour, but that would not really have made any difference, because names, to Guen, were so much less important than the people to whom they belonged.

Then the girl herself came in and immediately Guen was smitten with the thought that, somewhere, she had seen her before. She had on a blue frock of Guen's and a pair of red shoes that were Guen's also, and a size too large. Her hair, still damp from its encounter with the afternoon, curled round her head like a nimbus. Faintly flushed and guiltless of powder, her skin was that wonderful thing that should belong to red hair, but which, perhaps mercifully, seldom does. Her eyes, queerly hazel, considering that hair and skin, were very bright in a face that was a small, pure oval. But queerer than the hazel eyes were the long lashes that shaded them; that curled upwards and were dark, save at the edges which showed bronze, like her hair. (You really could forgive people for saying she "made up.") Her mouth Guen judged too small, perhaps, for intelligence, but since it carried a dimple in each corner few men would find fault with it. The only word Guen could think of when she looked at her was "delicious," forgetting that years ago she had learned at school that "delicious" is a word you can only apply, legitimately, to something you are able to eat. This new-comer had the extraordinary lighted-up beauty that puts out all other, and Jan thought that never before had he seen Guen look so plain. Even her hair, which he always rather admired, he saw now as an indeterminate mass of uninteresting brown.

Guen, looking deeper than Jan, saw something that he did not see—that would not have made any difference if he had. This beautiful face was a mask: there was nothing whatever behind it. But even beautiful masks are rare, and to that extent, at least, Guen found this one pleasing enough to look at, though troubled all the time by the conviction that she had seen it before. Its owner, so Jan elicited, was Roberta Leigh. She seemed anxious that he should spell it like that, and announced that her friends called her "Bobbie."

"Wish I were a friend," said Jan. "Have a cigarette?"

"Oh go on," said Miss Leigh, taking the cigarette and lighting up with aplomb. "When's the old war going to end?"

"Ask me another," said Jan, who was bored by the war as a topic of conversation.

"It'll be funny without it, you know," Miss Leigh told them. She was one of the people who had grown used to the war, who had used it first as a fillip to life and then as a background against which she draped the whole of her existence—a rather paltry thing, Guen felt, like the conversation, which did not seem to include her. She stood by the long windows and looked out on to the rain-swept garden, and wondered why suddenly she should see not the garden at all, but a dawn of opal and pearl in which she had sat waiting for Allan to come down to breakfast. Allan, who, there at three in the morning, had been going back to France. . . . Outside, the April morning had been dark and still. No movement at all—and no sound, save, suddenly, the clear, unbearable whistling of a blackbird.

All that was over. The horrors she had feared for Allan had passed him by. Allan, save that he limped a little, was safe and well. But that girl's laugh—so cheerful, so heartless, like the blackbird's cry that April morning—had brought these things drifting back. In time, perhaps, one would forget them. . . .

But because, to-day, she remembered, Guen's heart rose within her hot and bitter, and she hated the owner of this beautiful mask to whom the war was not a cockpit but a cock-tail. She turned and fled.

Miss Leigh prattled on. Prattled was certainly the word: she had no conversation, but just a string of nouns and verbs and adjectives, but chiefly adjectives. Not that Jan minded. If a girl was as pretty as all that it didn't matter in the least what she said.

Lieutenant Ancell, coming in presently in Jan's clothes, made Guen's discovery—that the string of words was not inclusive. He sat down and tried to hide himself behind the pages of the *Daily Telegraph* which he found lying on a chair. He looked as pathetic as a person reading the morning paper after midday always does look, and Alice, Anne Suffield's excellent maid, coming in with the tea-tray, was suddenly sorry for him. Not because of the newspaper, however, but because she thought

aged to him and that she deserved to have her

a, of course, did not belong to him, and he read (though "read" is scarcely the word) with a he floor and a general air of impatience, as though gone. He cared nothing whatever for Roberta or ertcomings. He didn't even care for her beauty—etrayed him into this. He only wanted to be own things and to be gone.

tea with a certain emphasis, which expressed not nion of Roberta, but her prejudice against the o'clock tea at a quarter to four. And when it e went out into the kitchen and pushed young nearer the fire, so that some of Roberta's things, s's favouritism, fell down among the ashes and astily rescued. They were cheap clothes, much nd be-laced, and bore distinct traces of Roberta's dle and thread. Alice did not approve of them. n carefully brought up by parents who, without agreed with the popular music-hall song which the index to feminine morality was the feminine the line. Moreover, Alice had an unreasoning l-haired people, even when they were as pretty as had managed to elude the light eyelashes which er concomitant, and she considered that this par-ired girl had been getting on much too well with the drawing-room. If you asked Alice, the red-as a minx. . . .

3

r as Guen was concerned, turned out a very dull Leader's one trick didn't enliven matters, because "Good dog!" at the wrong moment and shattered that he did the trick even less successfully than triumph as a social entity, however, was emphatic, judge by the number of times Roberta's pretty, ter rippled out and over the room. Guen, hear-her desultory conversation with young Ancell, y anything so pretty should remind her of so she wanted to forget. And whenever her eyes

rested upon Roberta's face she was certain that somewhere she had seen her before. Only where—and when?

There at her silver tea-tray, pink and flushed and smiling, Anne Suffield sat and dispensed tea. The drawing-room was red and stereotyped and rather ugly, but in it Anne Suffield looked like a pink rose in a poppy field. That was the sort of beauty hers had been—delicate, like a pastel-drawing or a piece of old china set in the sun. The ghost of it hung about her now and made people who admired it (or who remembered what it had once been) say that none of her children had inherited her beautiful skin. It was quite true: they hadn't. At least, not if your standard was porcelainic—pink and white and fragile. Guen's skin was brown, surmounted, when she was warm or excited, with pink. She was neither, this afternoon, so she remained a study in brown. Brown skin and brown eyes, that were quiet and brooding beneath their short lids, and hair that was all shades of brown and quite straight. She wore it short, not because it was fashionable—it had been short long before then—but because it was comfortable.

Not talking much, Anne Suffield sat there at her tea-tray, gathering up the odds and ends of what Roberta was saying to Jan. She couldn't make much of them: chiefly they seemed to be odd little bits of slang and the queer, over-worked expletives of the modern girl. Not that Anne Suffield really minded. She had long since learned to take anything anybody said without turning a hair; and yet she was at heart a thoroughly old-fashioned woman. She did not think it at all nice for young women to swear or use so much slang, or to smoke, or to do a good many of the other things they did do. She couldn't pretend that she liked it personally, and she thought, vaguely, that war wasn't good for young women. But she was proud, this afternoon, of Jan and the witty things he said, because she did not know that you did not need to be particularly witty to make a girl laugh when her teeth were as pretty as Roberta's. But Guen did, so she did not think Jan so clever or so witty as her mother thought him.

Lieutenant Ancell, of course, didn't think him clever or witty in the least degree. You couldn't expect it.

Towards the end of the meal a tall dark girl arrived whom Anne Suffield introduced to Roberta as "Miss Hervey" and addressed affectionately as "Madeleine." Madeleine Hervey was an old friend of the Suffields, and with Allan and Guen was going on, after an early dinner, to a literary lecture. For the past seven months her home had been in the Isle of Wight, but nearly a week ago she had come up to dig out some references for her employer. They had taken so long, she said, when the introductions were over, that they had eaten into the two days she had hoped to spend at Mount Calm.

"I simply must go back to-morrow morning," she told them; "I'm wretchedly disappointed."

Anne Suffield's eyes approved her for the adverb. Caryl or Jan, of course, would have said "horribly" or "dreadfully" or "beastly." Guen, too, perhaps, for in her mother's opinion her speech lacked the dignity of her written word. But Madeleine, somehow, had escaped the domination of the devastating adjective and adverb, as she had escaped the modern tricks of the casual expletive and the eternal cigarette. Madeleine did smoke, but only occasionally, not so much because she didn't care about it, as because she cared more about fresh air. (At least, Madeleine called it "fresh air"—most other people called it a draught.) Somehow she stood alone. In a generation that ambled she came moving like a thoroughbred.

Mrs. Suffield offered her tea and the opinion that Allan would be very disappointed. Madeleine said, "Will he?" and hastened on, as though, here, the conversational ground was shifting. With the colour in her pale face she darted back and took refuge in the British Museum. Ungratefully she complained that the Reading Room had been hotter than ever to-day, that it had given her a headache. Anne Suffield said that once, years ago, someone had let her stand just inside the swing doors of the Reading Room and look round. You gathered that she had been impressed. So many books and so many people and everybody looking so busy. All united, she remembered thinking, in the common desire for knowledge.

"No, mother dear, for sleep," interposed Guen from out the vague struggle that was her conversation with young Ancell.

"Yes," said Madeleine. "I've never understood why the

insomnious haven't discovered it. It would be a lot cheaper than drugs."

Jan and Roberta, who had been momentarily arrested by Guen's interposition from the corner, were not in the least interested in the Reading Room of the British Museum. They had never been there in their lives, and did not intend, if they could help it, to go. They went back to their string of words that did duty as conversation, and Mrs. Suffield suddenly looked at the clock and remarked that Caryl must have missed her train.

Caryl was the youngest Suffield and had been week-ending in the country.

"With the Hestons," Mrs. Suffield told Madeleine. "You remember the Hestons? Marjorie and Jack? We used to think at one time that he was fond of Caryl. They've taken a cottage down in Berkshire, near Wokingham, and Caryl goes down a good deal. Dear child, it's so nice for her! I'm sure she's working much too hard. It's such a handy place, Wokingham. You come straight through to Clapham Junction on the South Western. It's really an excellent journey."

As she poured out for Madeleine a second cup of tea she seemed to find that a thing of infinite consolation—that the journey from Wokingham to Teddington was really an excellent one.

5

And then, five minutes later, young Ancell rose to go. Guen rose, too, and mentally stretched herself, hoping that nobody would put obstacles in his way. She had found it very difficult to talk to him. He didn't care for books or music or the theatre, and certainly he didn't care for the Army, and was finding the war dull because he had been wounded in one of the back-to-the-wall battles in April last and was still in hospital. (So much, at least, she had got out of him.) In some sense, Guen felt, the "picking up" of Roberta had been a reaction from these things of anti-climax, for Roberta certainly looked as though she would make life considerably more worth while. Obviously, however, she hadn't, and altogether young Ancell had had a wretched afternoon. He was, Guen felt, quite a nice boy, though it had been rather

him to give Roberta away so easily. There she was with Jan. One really ought not to shout one's mistakes at house-tops. . . . But because she was sorry for him she rebated her mother's officious attempts to keep him in damp clothes—and the doctor. In Roberta's case, she was adamant, so Jan passed over his notebook and might write down her address. The clothes could be sent on.

"I'll not have you both on my conscience," Anne Suffield said. "One of you will be more than sufficient."

Jan looked at the untidy mess Roberta had made of his book and smiled at what she had written—"Bobbie Leigh, Manningtree Avenue, Highgate, N."

They had all heard of Manningtree Avenue, for Highgate, where there was no war, was their home, and, optimistically, Anne had cherished hopes of some day returning to it. To Anne Suffield, Manningtree Avenue was a name, signifying a place; but to Jan and Guen and Madeleine it was a dull life of three-story houses let out these days to two families each. It was a decayed street—not even cheerfully and brightly ugly—where too many children played and street vendors and barrel-organs went unrestrained. It appalled Guen that Roberta belonged to so dreary a place, that she was losing her youth and beauty back to it. You couldn't wonder that life was livelier by the creation of casual acquaintance. Poor child! Fate had not been too kind. That it had given Roberta so little beside that beautiful face struck her suddenly as outrageous—like giving her no money and no banking account.

"Of course, Haighgate's very nice," Roberta was saying to Madeleine, "but you do miss the river, don't you?"

Her voice, for all its affected pronunciation, was remarkably clear.

It had, so Guen thought, the qualities of a physical beauty.

It was like a paw, incredibly soft, which reached out and touched their faces.

"There's the Heath, you know," Madeleine replied. "The river doesn't nearly make up for its loss. But then, it's not any river tricks. I don't row or punt."

"Neither do I," said Roberta. "Rowing spoils your figure, but there's always plenty of nice boys who do."

Jan felt there would be, somehow, for Roberta. Even

with a war on, and that accent and that awful background of Manningtree Avenue.

As they trooped into the hall Jan managed, somehow, to get a word with Roberta, and the end of what he said drifted out to Madeleine. "All right, then. To-morrow. That's settled. Don't forget." She wondered for an instant what it was that Roberta was not to forget and what it was they had "settled." But only indifferently, because Jan, she knew, was incorrigible where a pretty face was concerned, and besides, Madeleine did not like Jan, and was not given to wasting conjecture upon him.

The grandfather clock in the hall was striking the quarter-past five as the good-byes were being said, and Madeleine fell to wondering why they had all trooped out in this ridiculous fashion to see two people off whom, an hour ago, they had never met. Then Jan's hand was on the door-knob. He turned it, and a young man, key in hand, looked in upon them.

Afterwards they tried, some of them, to pretend that they saw, even then, the finger of fate in his appearance at that particular moment. But, of course, they couldn't possibly have done. They didn't, any of them, see anything at all save the perfectly ordinary phenomenon of a young man coming home early, as he had promised; that he had two large volumes (publishers' "remainders" as Guen knew) under his arm, and a black smudge across the bridge of his nose.

"Hallo, Allan!" said Guen, and Allan came in.

CHAPTER TWO

1

HE was a plain edition of Jan, and he limped a little, which detracted, somehow, from his height. Just now, too, he looked tired, and there was that black smudge on the bridge of his nose. . . . If it was a less handsome face than Jan's it was also a more sensitive one. People meeting Allan casually remembered for long afterwards some look in his deep-set eyes, something unusually tender about his mouth—that was wide and not beautiful in any ordinary sense of the word. He had the look of one who sees and feels more than most other people, which means that he suffered, or could suffer, more as well.

"Hallo!" he said now, as he stepped into the hall. "What's up?" And then he saw Ancell and Roberta, or, more properly, he understood that a stranger in a Second Lieutenant's uniform was there. Really, of course, he saw nothing and no one at all but Roberta. She stood there with her flaming hair curling up over the edge of her green wool hat, her hands dug deeply into the pockets of the jersey that was Guen's, and her delicate complexion intensified by the hot tea she had drunk—and the stronger brew that had been Jan's admiring glances. Once again, performing the introductions, Guen was caught by the sense of familiarity. Somewhere she had seen Roberta in some such hat and jersey, her hands dug deeply into the pockets, and smiling, as she smiled now on Allan. Her attitude gave to Guen the sense of a thing studied, cultivated before a mirror. But she felt that Roberta smiled upon Allan because she always did smile upon the young men who swam into her orbit, and because, usually, they liked it. Not that Roberta cared whether Allan liked it or not. She thought him a very uninteresting edition of his handsome brother, and she considered that a man looked ridiculous with a smudge on his nose. Yet she was not unconscious

that his eyes were on her face, and that he was returning her smile. Something she read in the look he gave her sent a glow of flattered vanity through her soul—what there was of it—and she laughed. That pretty laugh that was heartless and a little cruel—that already Guen hated. But what Roberta said was for Jan, who was dragging Leader back into the hall.

"That's a funny name for a dog," she said. "Why did you give it him?"

"I didn't," said Jan. "My brother here chose it. After some dog in a book. . . ."

"Oh, I see," said Roberta.

But Allan could see she didn't, and was moved to explain.

"Emily Brontë," he said, "had a dog called Leader."

"And who," asked Roberta sweetly, "was Emily Brontë?" Allan smiled.

"She isn't read nowadays," he said. "She wrote a book called *Wuthering Heights* and some poems."

"Oh, an *authoress*," said Roberta, with a magnificent air of condescension.

Quite suddenly, and without another word, Allan turned away, hung up his hat and began to struggle out of his coat. From her corner by the stairs Madeleine stepped forward and helped him.

"Hullo, Mad!" he said.

She knew then that, until that moment, he hadn't seen her at all. He had seen no one save Roberta, flushed, smiling, delicious. (The word had come to him, too.) Even now it was not at Madeleine he looked, but at Roberta, flirting her way down to the gate, with Jan at her side and Leader, scenting a walk, barking furiously at her heels. Her last look and smile were for Jan.

Back there in the hall Allan looked at Madeleine. He thought she looked tired, and he resented it, because he was tired himself. . . . He forgot that anybody would have looked tired after Roberta. Or perhaps he didn't know. . . .

Allan declined tea because dinner was to be ready at six. He felt suddenly dull and dispirited, and it was certainly somebody's fault that there were no letters for him. He stood

there leaning against the mantelpiece, taking no notice of an eager Leader, and not talking: completely forgetful of Madeleine, whom he had looked forward so much to seeing; whom he hadn't seen for many months. Worse than that, he had forgotten how much he had wanted to see her. It was Guen who thought of Madeleine.

"Headache?" she asked.

Madeleine said yes and put it on to the Reading Room. Guen recommended aspirin, and Jan went off to fetch it. They heard him whistling all the way upstairs, as if he felt tremendously gay, as he probably did. Guen and Madeleine sat talking of Roberta: they were sure, both of them, that somewhere they had seen her before. But neither could think where. Allan learned that they found her nice to look at, but rather boring as a conversationalist, and interrupted to say that most people were, if it came to that. His voice was so heavy with grievance that Guen laughed.

"Poor old Allan!" she said. "Is that how you feel?"

Allan said nothing—merely sat there glooming by the fire and frowning at Guen's attempts to work out the problem of Roberta's identity. For some reason or other it seemed to get on his nerves, and suddenly he rapped out at them:

"Oh, for God's sake leave her alone, both of you. We shan't see her again, so what does it matter?"

They were, all of them, very sure of that—except Jan, and Jan was very sure that he would. But Allan's irritability stung them into silence. They sat there listening to Jan's cheerful whistling. He was a long time over the aspirin hunt, but Madeleine had forgotten the aspirin and her need of it. She sat there realising that here was the end—not the beginning as she had hoped, for which, ever since that day, just a year ago, when she had gone to see Allan in hospital, she seemed to have been waiting. And it had never come. There had never been anything more than that stupendous wave of feeling in which she had been like to drown, sitting there at Allan's white bedside. She knew, now, that there never would be. It bore you up and it cast you down. There was no more in it than that.

Allan and Madeleine had known each other from their schooldays—from the time when she had been brought home to tea by Guen, and her twin brother Reg had played with

Allan in their school eleven. (But Reg, poor boy, had thrown his last ball. Done with games, and not needing them, he slept very peacefully now beneath the Turkish sky.) In a way, perhaps, Allan and Madeleine had known each other too well, so that the ways of friendship had seemed so much pleasanter, so much more natural, than the ways of love. Moreover, they were uncannily self-possessed: had kept their heads even over the war. They remained "friends" even when Allan went out in nineteen-fifteen to France, and when he came home on leave. It didn't look as though anything else at that time had entered their heads.

Until that day in hospital. . . .

Madeleine remembered this afternoon, and very vividly, how the thing had come to her. She had gone alone that day to the Hospital, and the Sister of the ward had come over to say how much better the patient seemed. "I'm afraid," she said, "that he's always going to be a little lame, but there are no more wars—ever—for him." These two facts—that he would be lame and that he would never fight again—it was which suddenly opened up the truth to Madeleine. It was like lifting a curtain to the sunrise—one felt dazed and blinded afterwards. . . . New and startlingly precious these two facts stared at her until, slowly, they merged into one. "A lame man's no use to them!"—then divided again, "He belongs, now—to me."

Later, she thought she must have been mad. . . . All the same, it was unendingly strange that the madness should have seized hold upon her there in that quiet place of rest and healing. She had been sane enough during the misery that was August, nineteen-fourteen, and that greater misery that was France.

But in the days that followed Allan showed no sign at all of realizing that anything between them was altered or altering. Quite quietly and naturally he picked up again the silver thread of their happy friendship, not seeing that now it dragged its way through Madeleine's fingers like an iron chain, tearing the flesh. . . .

It was in the March of the following year that John Osenton, to whom Madeleine acted as secretary, and for whom she did research work, bought a house in the Isle of Wight, whence with his household he departed. After that there was nothing

between Allan and Madeleine but letters, and letters, with a person of Allan's temperament and his flair for words, are apt to be dangerous things. Either Allan had written more than he meant or Madeleine had read more than he put into them. Anyway, this afternoon, she saw his letters as shams—as the rock upon which he tried his soul, upon which he carved the path to self-expression. He wasn't in the least glad to see her again; he didn't care enough even to pretend he was glad. He only thought of her as a person he had known all his life, as a person to write to, as a person to write to him. Words, words, words! He cared, properly, for nothing else at all. Then Roberta's pretty face got in the way, and she wasn't sure even of that.

And it was of Roberta that Jan, coming back with the aspirin, began to talk. Roberta, he told Allan, was a "peach"—that her companion, lucky dog, had "picked her up" down there on the towing-path. "Picked her up, my boy. Ab-so-bally-lutely."

But the exquisite humour of the situation did not, somehow, reveal itself to Allan.

"He told you that, did he?" he growled, and sat there in his gloom while Jan went on with the story. When she thought it had gone far enough Guen interposed.

"She's like someone I've met or have seen somewhere," she said. "Her face was oddly familiar. Was it to you, Allan?"

Jan chortled.

"Rather not," he said. "You know Allan never looks at a girl."

Allan got up as though the subject bored him.

"I'm going to wash," he told them.

"I should, old chap," said Jan. "You need it. You've a black smudge on your nose you'd look better without."

Then Guen remembered.

"Got it!" she said. "You'll find that girl's face on Hilmer Roydon's tube advertisements. I suppose she's what's known as a photographer's model."

They all knew Roydon, of course. He was the man people went to for a photograph, and who presented them eventually with a beautiful picture.

"Lord, yes!" said Jan, who looked at the photographs on tubes.

Allan, who did not, scowled at his face in the glass and took himself off. A moment or so later Guen followed, ostensibly to change her frock. Jan whistled.

"Paying out funeral money hasn't been good for Allan's little temper," he observed, and turned to talk to Madeleine who looked, he thought, remarkably "off colour" this afternoon. Not that Jan admired Madeleine much at any time. He had never been able to see what Guen and Allan saw in her, for Madeleine, with her broad white brow, her darkly earnest eyes and pale, delicate face, was not a type that appealed to Jan; and always her little air of quietness stood like a stout wall between them. There were other things, too. . . . Their natural antipathy was deepened and strengthened by Jan's knowledge that Madeleine "saw through" him and by her knowledge, extraordinarily irritating, that no one else did. Not even Guen, though she had seen something, of course, a good deal more than the rest of his adoring family, who saw him for what, superficially, he was—a delightful creature, handsome, affable, affectionate. And kind—not only to people, but to animals, who adored him. At Highgate all the dogs of the neighbourhood had known him, and all the cats. She remembered the cats, especially, how they would run, purring, along the front-garden railings to have their heads rubbed. It was a queer world. . . .

But because these reflections came between her and her attempts at conversation, she was glad when Jan rose and went out to give Leader a run before dinner. Left to her own thoughts she found that they were neither very interesting nor profitable, though outrageously persistent, and she wished fervently that she could find some excuse for escaping the evening's lecture in that stuffy room in the Tottenham Court Road. But there the aspirin had cut the ground from under her feet, for by this time everybody knew that the English variety could be depended upon. It was of no use at all to pretend that it didn't do you any good.

Suddenly the door burst open and a young girl, hatted and cloaked, came into the room.

"Hallo, Caryl!" said Madeleine.

Caryl came forward, threw both arms round Madeleine's neck and kissed her.

"How perfectly lovely to see you again!" she cried. "And, *oh, Mad, I've had the most heavenly week-end.*"

When she had thrown off her hat and seated herself beside Madeleine you saw with a start how like she was to Guen. There was the same brown-tinted skin, the same short-lidded brown eyes, the same brown straight hair worn short, but with a line of fringe as straight as the rest of it. Perhaps it struck you that everything about Caryl was "straight"—not only her hair, but the slight boyish figure and the glance she gave you from her short-lidded eyes. She was, moreover, one of the few girls who look "right" with short hair, perhaps because it was not contradicted, as it is in so many women, by her figure. Her sex did not flaunt itself in physical curves or in feminine tricks. She was supremely unselfconscious.

But though the likeness between Caryl and Guen was so strong that it startled you sometimes to see them together, there was a note about Caryl that Guen had not; the eager, passionate note that showed in the way she talked and listened, and in the way she walked—quickly, with head thrown back and lips slightly apart. She was decidedly not beautiful. No one even would have called her "pretty," but for most people she had an instantaneous attraction none the less real because it was difficult to give it a name.

"You don't look a bit well, you know," she told Madeleine. "I believe that horrid Osenton creature gives you too much work to do. I think you ought to leave."

"Rubbish, my dear," said Madeleine. "I'm all right. My pale face doesn't mean anything."

"Oh, I know colour hasn't anything to do with it. It isn't that. But you look so tired—tired right through!"

Madeleine laughed.

"I believe, you know," she said, "that I've merely got the hump."

"You want a holiday."

"My dear, I want so many things . . . and I'm not going to have one of them."

"You won't want them presently."

"You mean I'll get tired of wanting them—that I'll change my mind?"

"No, I don't. I don't mean anything of the sort. I mean that you'll learn to do without them."

"I wonder if I shall?"

"'Course. You're like me. There's a spark somewhere in us that never goes out . . . there isn't, anything at all that can put it out."

"I'm sure my spark's quite gone out."

"It hasn't. It never will—till you're dead. Neither will mine. Both of us are so glad, you see, to be alive."

"Lots of people are that."

"But they're not like us. . . . They aren't willing to take everything that comes—the rough with the smooth. And you know we *are*. We're grateful for anything."

"That isn't true of me any longer, Caryl. I'm not the amiable person you knew seven months ago. I've grown hard and resentful and . . . carping. I think that's the word. And the worst of it is it hasn't anything to do with the war. It's something intimate and personal—and the war stopped being that a long while ago. It's just something I want for myself and shan't get—*ever*."

"How do you know?" asked Caryl. "That's the lovely part. You never do. You can't get a lien on the future quite like that, you know."

Years ago someone Guen knew had made a cartoon of Caryl and given it her. It showed a queer elfin little creature crawling sideways out of the stride of a monster labelled Woe, and underneath it was written, "Extraordinary Convolutions of a Young Person Who Means To Be Happy." It hung now above Caryl's dressing-table, so that she was reminded of her goal every time she brushed her hair.

"What was there specially nice about that week-end of yours, Caryl?"

"Nothing was *specially* nice. It was all nice. There was only Marjorie and Jack and Mrs. Heston and a young man Jack knew, named Merrick, Richard Merrick. He had a motor-car and took us all out. Not a Rolls-Royce, you know, or anything like that. Just a common or garden sort of thing, but still a car. He exceeded the speed limit abominably."

"You're quite sure Mr. Merrick wasn't 'specially' nice?"

"I don't know. . . . Probably. . . . I didn't think about it. He just fitted in, you know. Better, I'm afraid, than we fitted into his car. We *did* look a crew! I sound, don't I, like Matthew Arnold criticising the Shelley *ménage*?"

Caryl was not "literary"; her *penchant* was mathematical,

but it was not for nothing that she had a booky brother and sister. Besides, as she would have told you, you can't hear Keats and Shelley talked about as though they were first cousins without its having some sort of an effect upon you.

"I suppose it's time I went and washed," she said, just as Guen came in with the sound of the dinner-gong. Guen wore a polychromatic frock and a diminutive frown, which cleared as her eyes fell upon Caryl.

"Hallo, Caryl," she said. "You just arrived? Had a good time?"

"Rather!" said Caryl, collecting her belongings. There was the usual hunt for gloves, always traitorously inclined, while Guen explained that Allan had had a wretched day at the office and that his ankle had been very painful.

"He'll be all right soon, I expect," she said, "but, of course, it would happen to-day!"

"Why to-day, particularly?" Caryl wanted to know, and then unexpectedly read her answer in Madeleine's face in which something was stabbing two patches of brilliant colour. . . . When Caryl had done thinking how nice Madeleine looked when she blushed, she reflected that love—"that sort of love"—was somehow connected for her with poetry and scenery, which she always tried to ignore, and with the couples on the Heath, the Embraced and Embracing, whom you couldn't ignore. . . . Still, if Madeleine was "in love" with Allan, it was certainly a thousand pities that Allan was not in love with Madeleine. Caryl would have liked Madeleine for a sister. . . .

"Guen," she said suddenly, over a pile of her outdoor clothes, "need I change? I look quite nice underneath all this. Or does that frock mean that someone's coming?"

"Only 'A.G.'" said Guen.

"Only 'A.G.,'" said Caryl, but Guen did not turn a hair.

"Hurry up—you'll be late," she said calmly.

Caryl went. She was not coming to the lecture. Caryl didn't care for lectures and besides, she had an essay to write upon the subject, "Is Shelley greater as a Nature or as a Love Poet?" It was no subject for Caryl who didn't like poetry, knew nothing about love (of "that" sort) and never looked at the scenery. She did not shine at English. Ten to one the essay would come back to her marked "Peculiarly unfeeling. Read the *Ode to the West Wind* again."

It was very extraordinary, Caryl used to think, that a girl couldn't take her B.A. without having to wade through all these gentleman-poets. Not that the women were any better, except that there were fewer of them. They were a gloomy lot. Caryl didn't care very much for literary people. Most of Guen's friends she voted tiresome, and was very glad it was so hard to get them to come out to the suburbs, which they despised. Her strictures, however, did not apply to "A.G.," who was coming to dinner and going on to Guen's lecture-affair. (Fancy anybody *electing* to listen to a lecture!) Caryl considered that Antony Gore, to his friends, was a quite delightful person, not in the least resembling that dull, high-brow journal, *Life and Letters*, which he edited. She wondered, as she brushed her hair, whether Guen really intended to marry him. Here again it was not the problem of love which interested her, but only the idea of Antony Gore as brother-in-law. A.G., so Caryl thought, would do. He had many excellent qualities—good temper and humour and enthusiasm. But, best of all, he was so completely unlike the things he wrote and he wasn't everlastingly thrusting English literature down your throat. He was one of the few "writing" people who seemed to know that books weren't everything. Even Allan thought they were. Caryl could quite understand why Allan was not in love with Madeleine. Properly, he hadn't seen her yet. She was only a person who liked books and could talk and write good letters about them. . . .

Gore had arrived by the time Caryl got downstairs and was standing in the middle of the hearthrug listening to something that Allan was saying and which Guen kept interrupting. Caryl liked the look of A.G. She admired his sleek dark head, with its well-brushed hair, and thought that the way in which his eyes were set back in his head made his brow look even more enormous than it really was. Good temper lurked in the corners of his mouth and decision in the jut of his chin. Caryl noticed these things afresh about him to-night, and saw that he had brought the new number of *Life and Letters*, at which Madeleine sat looking. It was, she knew, to include a new poem of Allan's and a sketch of Guen's, and it was the sketch she sat down now to look at over Madeleine's shoulder. Of course, she hated it. She always did. Guen's work hurt. It was full of little pin-pricks that got home each time and

nearly drove you mad. Caryl glanced across at her now and wondered how she did it. She looked kind and benevolent and amused. You'd never imagine she would write like this. But there were several Guens. The Guen that stood there now, listening with kind eyes to what Gore was saying, never put pen to paper.

From Allan you got what you expected. You knew that what Allan wrote would be full of savage discontent and bitter contrast, because that was Allan. Forever tilting at life, at a world he could neither understand nor tolerate. And the war hadn't made him any better. The poems Allan had written from the trenches were awful. It was like him to call them *Roses and Rue*. If she turned her head the name stared down at her from a slim green volume amongst its fellows on the little shelf Anne Suffield kept for the "family works."

"No wonder I'm not booky," Caryl thought, as she sat there on the arm of Madeleine's chair, "I'm a blooming reaction, that's what I am."

Also, she was very hungry and was glad when the dinner-gong cut what A.G. was saying in half and they all trooped in to dinner.

4

To Madeleine it was a horrible affair, for she swallowed with it the caviare of disappointment. Allan and his headache sat at her side, talking very little about anything. Jan, on the other hand, talked to everybody about nothing, and Guen and Caryl and Antony Gore talked to everybody, most unselfishly, about everything. Mrs. Suffield never "talked." She made remarks, more or less intelligent, but generally uncorrelated. She was deeply engaged with the ritual of dinner and in being proud of her children. She thought how gay Caryl was after her week-end, and what a pity it was Jan would have to go back without seeing his father; and how nice Guen looked in her new frock, and how unlike her idea of an editor that nice Mr. Gore was to be sure, and what a pity it was Allan's head was so bad.

But Madeleine sat there like one in a dream and with a strange pain in her heart. Madeleine was only twenty-four, but this evening she felt old—old with the suffering of all the

women who have ever loved. And while the meal went on—and the talk and Allan's silence—she sat there with that pain in her heart that never stopped.

For she did not want to suffer. And she resented bitterly that she should suffer through love. Love was not the only thing in life. Life was packed full of wonder and interest. Caryl was right there, at least. You wished you could believe she was right altogether, for it was absurd anyone should feel like this about one little bit of life. Throughout Anne Suffield's carefully-cooked meal these were the things Madeleine Hervey thought of. She longed with all the passion of youth and all the fury of pain for a world in which men were not, or for a return of that blessed time when no man had disturbed her peace, when she looked on them with indifferent eyes, talking her glib rubbish about "friendship. . . ."

5

Of the evening's lecture she remembered little beyond the fact that the young poet who was alleged to be the subject of it had married a Greek lady and had not deserted her. She couldn't very well have missed that because the lecturer repeated it three times, as though it was a fact he wished above all to impress upon you. But personalia did not interest Madeleine. The research work she did for Mr. Osenton (and her living) had sickened her for it. She remained one of those beautifully rare people who can be content to know a man or woman's work without wishing to pick over the rags of their private lives. Moreover, this little group of young men who called themselves the Poetry Circle, and under whose auspices the lecture had been given, irritated her quite alarmingly. They were clever young men with a determination to be heard—a laudable object they had many ways of achieving. Their verse was essentially and startlingly modern, never quite so good as they imagined nor as bad as those alleged who didn't approve of it—or of them. In it either the old technique died a painful death or a new one came to even more painful birth. The writers of it cared, as a Society, so little for the poetic traditions that even those among them whose knowledge of technique was beyond dispute, preferred to copy out their carefully-written sonnets into the *vers libre* form, or lack of

form. When you got used to the new method (and you were apt, at first, to find it very disturbing) you began to notice a number of other things about these productions of this little group. These poems, coloured, imagistic, drenched in a sort of violent, primal beauty, were yet protests against the older canons of art—against the deliberate shutting up of art to anything that was not ordinarily “beautiful.” They gave you life raw, jagged and bloody, as they gave you the war and the base hospitals, so that you couldn’t help feeling that they agreed with Matthew Arnold’s dictum that poetry should be at bottom a “criticism of life,” even though they spent much time in wondering, privately and publicly, why that misguided gentleman ever tried to write poetry! They struggled frantically, these young men, in an inarticulate effort to be articulate; none of the violent, impatient things they saw and felt and believed would fit at all into the old forms and “poetic diction” that had done for the “old buffers” like Tennyson and Wordsworth and Arnold, whom they derided in public. It was their own phrase: they wrote newspaper articles which justified it and poems which didn’t. But none of them ever made the mistake of including Keats among the “old buffers” whose methods they scorned, for always, and in spite of themselves, they remembered that Keats was a Greek! Allied with their contempt of older methods was a love of queer words and of the extraordinary adjective that had never qualified that particular noun before, and looked as though it did not like doing it even now.

They had their faults—glaring even to the people who had no quarrel with their modernity and didn’t really mind their manners. They used the phrase “professional poet” a good deal too frequently and they showed an unhealthily snobbish tendency to make of poetry a fashionable occupation. They laboured, most of them, under a really painful delusion that they could read verse aloud extremely well (their own, of course, because they did not believe in reading other people’s), and they suffered, like Wordsworth, from a faulty sense of humour and a thoroughly uncritical faculty in relation to their own productions, so that, like Wordsworth again, they thought all their work was equally good, whereas (unlike his) it was often merely equally bad.

Guen, at least, had another thing against them. You

wouldn't have gathered from their membership list, from their conversation or from their annual anthology, that there were any women poets at all. There weren't many of them, it is true, but there were some, and Guen couldn't help feeling they ought to have made an effort to find them.

Allan believed that he detested literary people—that if he admired anyone it was the little clerk who went home and tended his garden, and saw nothing either in words or fame. He resented the fact that he did not care for gardening—that he invariably pulled the wrong things up—and that clerking produced in him a mental and spiritual atrophy.

After the lecture Guen went on with Gore to his room in Bloomsbury, where they would sit with a lot of other people and talk "shop" and drink coffee. These things to-night did not appeal to Allan or Madeleine, so they took themselves off, and burrowing into the tube, got down to Kensington. Outside Barker's they climbed on to a Twickenham bus and sat together on the front seat. The night was beautiful. There was no wind at all: nothing but a large white moon, and silence.

Night had come, peaceful, large, indifferent. And Madeleine hated herself because beneath night's calm and quiet the wings of her spirit beat furiously.

"Cold?" Allan asked her presently.

She said no, but he felt her shiver against his arm. He had an instinct to put the mackintosh cover more closely about her, but he left it as it was. The bus ran out of Kensington into Kensington's anti-climax, the Hammersmith Road, and Allan sat there glaring down upon it out of his tangled mood. He could not understand why Madeleine's coming should have dispelled the glamour, that, for the last few months, had belonged to every thought of her. He saw her now as the link she had always been with the things he cared for, as a reinforcement of his own beliefs and ideals. The brief glamour was gone. He felt now no stir of the blood, no beating of the pulse: he wanted just nothing at all of her but the old "sisterly sweet hand-in-hand." Allan knew nothing of women; none of the casual, fragmentary encounters that come to most young men of his age had been his: he had been bound by not so much as the lightest of kisses, and he had no way of discovering how much of that "glamour" had got into

his letters—how much of it had reached Madeleine. But, at least, he understood that something had happened to his friendship with Madeleine, that if he wanted to keep it he would have to fight. And he wasn't going to fight. At least he was clear about that. Like most young men in October, nineteen-eighteen, he was tired of fighting. So he sat there saying nothing until, at Hammersmith Broadway, Madeleine's voice—cold, incisive, like the night—broke the silence.

"I'm rather chilly. I think I'll go inside."

He let her go—did not offer to accompany her. Perhaps he knew she hoped he would not. His face was set and frowning: his chin dug deeply into his turned-up collar. He looked neither attractive nor amiable—and was not.

And, there, inside a crowded bus, with several strap-hangers blocking her mercifully from the public gaze, Madeleine had liberty to look as miserable as she felt. There was a certain amount of relief, she discovered, just in being able to do that. But it was the last time. Misery was a luxury—not a thing you cherished—made a memory of. She was only thankful that here and now she could see that the thing was over—that at last she knew where she was. To-morrow she would go back again to the Osentons at Sea View, in the north-east corner of the Isle of Wight. Joliffe would meet her at Ryde and drive her in, because the boat service was suspended during the war and, in any case, only ran in summer. And at Sea View would be Mrs. Osenton with something hot after her long drive, and dinner put back to give her time to change and rest. And in her room a fire and flowers and a new book somebody was feeling enthusiastic about. And there would be busy mornings at work; the walks along the sand in the afternoon with Mrs. Osenton and the children and Gyp, the new puppy. And energetic days when they would walk into Ryde and have tea, or into St. Helens, where you would not get tea, but only a laugh at the notice board which warned you against bathing without a decent costume! Nothing more exciting than that. Good, plain, healthful, useful days—which had been so happy. . . . The Osenton regime held no elements of tragedy or comedy. Madeleine had worked for John Osenton since she was a girl of seventeen with her hair down her back. She knew exactly what he wanted and how he liked it done. John Osenton was forty-

five; his wife six or seven years younger, and they were devoted to each other. Nothing troubled the peace of their home save the fear that some day Madeleine would get married and leave them. In their hearts they were terribly afraid of this "somebody" with whom she corresponded. With so very much smoke, surely there must be a tiny flame, at least. . . .

There, suddenly beneath her veil of misery, Madeleine shut her heart up tightly to woe, striving to see nothing but the loving kindness of these people who were fond of her and appreciated the work she did. There was nothing there on the future for her but that and the things which she associated with it—the sea, the long stretch of sand, and bathing on warm days, decently, from the Osentons' tent: the sweetness and freshness of the simple things of life which she remembered, here in this crowded bus, with a little pang that was half joy and half pain. Caryl was right. There wasn't anything in the world which could take your happiness from you unless you chose to let it. And love wasn't all, but only a little bit of life. In spite of all the poets and novelists that ever were, that was true. You had to remember it when, with knit brows, love passed you by.

CHAPTER THREE

1

THE Suffields were an affectionate family yet with a strong tendency to split up naturally into groups of two. There were Jan and Penelope, Guen and Allan, and John and Anne Suffield, who, as the parents, held the fort between them from the fierce onslaught of the modernity of their children. And there was Caryl, with a foot in both camps and an encouraging hand held out to the fort. . . .

Jan and Pen were twins, so that, in a measure at least, their affinity had a natural basis. But, also, it had another, because Pen happened to be the type of girl Jan most appreciated. Penelope Suffield was neat, in mind and features; running, like her mother before her, to plumpness and platitude, but always ready to do the dull domestic things for you that it bored you to do for yourself, and always to be placated with a seat at some revue or musical comedy if things went wrong. In nineteen-sixteen Pen had married Tom Warren, with the proviso of "no babies till after the war"; but even Tom Warren had grown tired of waiting for a thing so vague as the end of the war, which explains, perhaps, why Pen was expecting a baby in the New Year. Pen was ridiculous about babies. . . . That always was how she put it, "babies" not "children"—helpless little animals in long-clothes at the stage at which Mrs. Suffield (most excellent and old-fashioned of mothers) had found her children the most trying and least prepossessing. "Oh, I love 'em," Pen would say. "I love 'em so much, I could eat 'em."

In her queer fastidious fashion Guen was revolted, somehow, by this outrageous suggestion that a child was a lollipop. Yet she knew that, after all, babies in war time were all right if you were like Pen—who had been born without imagination and never worried; and if you took care to have a husband whose factory was deemed of National Importance, and if

you moved out of the air-raid zone. Tom insisted on that; but even the air raids wouldn't have put Pen "off." Looking after Tom and having babies and being inordinately proud of her twin in khaki was now Pen's business in life. Jan, sniffing prospectively at the babies, thought it sounded dull; but it wasn't Pen who would find fault with it—war or no war.

And, on the whole, the Suffields had had remarkable luck over the war.

2

John Suffield, of course, didn't count. He was fifty-five when the war began and was out of things from the start. He remained out of it even when Parliament had done its worst, but he had the belligerent tendencies of his age and class, and the sight of him poring over maps and his newspaper used, in the early days, to irritate Allan beyond all bearing. "As though the war has justified itself," he said bitterly to Guen, "if it helps him to rub up his geography."

But it wasn't only that John Suffield was out of it and Pen's Tom, with his factory of National Importance and his new duties as a "Special" (which, in his honest moments, he confessed he preferred to those of a soldier). Always there remained the extraordinary luck of Jan and Allan. It surprised you afresh every time you thought of it.

Jan (who had been christened Arthur Jannison) had, of course, attested under the Derby scheme, and (in *his* honest moments, less frequent, perhaps, than Tom's and less honest) he would have told you that though he was inordinately glad to wear the sign of attestation on his arm because it saved so much unpleasantness, he did not in the very least want to join the Army. The Army—and here he would have been perfectly frank—did not accord with his temperament, and it was for Jan a stroke of extraordinary good luck that his father's firm, as well as Tom's factory, was deemed of "National Importance," for Jan had been made a junior member of the firm of Linton and Suffield (now Linton, Suffield and Co.) and, in his peregrinations on the firm's behalf, had already revealed a prodigious faculty for extracting orders from a granite block. Later, when the firm would do no more for him, his unexpected "B" category had secured for him a post

as Equipment Officer in the Flying Corps. "B" category was explained by a "murmuring" heart, which troubled everybody very much except its owner and Guen—both of whom were apt to be scornful of doctors and never really believed in it.

But Jan did very well as an Equipment Officer and early revealed himself as one of the few square pegs the War Office really had fixed up with a square hole. Also the hole was continually dug anew and elsewhere, so that for Jan life was perpetually a thing of fresh woods and pastures new. More than that, he became presently as clever at obtaining leave as he had been at obtaining orders, and though life in the army was not the life Jan would have chosen, he would have been the first to admit that, all things considered, he had not done badly, thanks in particular to that unsuspected "murmuring heart." Jan was glad he wouldn't have to fight. You can't put up a good fight, so some placard or other has told us, "unless your blood boils." And Jan's never did. His thinking apparatus never reached sufficiently high pressure for that. Jan liked being alive and he could not spare time to hate anybody—even a German. "Live and let live" was his motto, and to him all others would have been hideously disturbing.

To Allan, however, luck had been less kind—had given him no heart that murmured but only a temperament that hated war and a conscience that would not let him stand aside. He could not have borne, like Jan, to have found a square hole of comfort. If Jan's temperament was one that accorded ill with the Army and the things the Army required you to do, these were facts ten times more true of Allan's. There were few things, on the whole perhaps, that Allan's "temperament" did accord with. It wasn't only the war that had revealed him as a square peg in a round hole. Somehow, he had always been that. He loved life so much that it hurt—its beauty, its pathos, its futility and stupidity. Life never was but eternally about to be—something inexpressible. Always, in its essence, life slipped through his fingers. He loved form, and was but an indifferent draughtsman: colour, and had no skill with paint: poetry and the music of words, and was only a "minor" poet with little hope of growing the wings of a "major." The only figures he cared about were figures of speech—and he was a clerk in the Comet Insurance Company.

At seventeen, "drawing the line at engines, anyhow," Allan had chosen the Comet instead of "the firm," as, six months before, Maurice Linton had chosen art. Maurice, in John Suffield's opinion, was "at the bottom of things." (All those things about Allan, he meant, which he found it difficult to associate with any son of his.) Maurice Linton had "ideas," and "ideas" in a young man were always dangerous, especially if they centred round art and literature which, as everybody knew, took you nowhere. At seventeen, however, art (or his love of it) had taken Maurice to the Slade, whilst Allan got through his "matric" and was profoundly bored by the prospect of the business career which he saw lying in wait for him round the corner. At seventeen, during these last few months at school, Allan had seen life rather as one unending visit to the library, with quiet intervals for reading the volumes one secured or for snaring impressions and thoughts on to paper, with book-talk walks in the company of Guen or Madeleine on the Heath, or up in the tiny room Maurice called his "studio." Each of the four pitched life by the same keynote; somewhere there was an invisible thread, holding them together.

In a way, and earlier, John Suffield had been proud of these two children of his. "Our two bookworms—guaranteed harmless," he would say of them to visitors, but as they grew older this was an opinion he tended to modify—at least as far as Allan was concerned. For Allan, being a boy, would have his living to earn. His itch for scribbling, tolerable in a school-boy, was a good deal less so in a young man about to take his place in the world. It was time, so he thought, that Allan concentrated on the "things that mattered," and these, to John Suffield, had extraordinarily little to do with art and literature.

But though there were times when Allan was oppressed by a sense of utter antipathy to his father ("glowing," as he said to Guen, "with beef and bullion,") he had for his mother, for all she shared his father's view of life, that deep accepting love of the boy for whom other women do not as yet exist. It was for her sake that he wished he did not find so hideous all these things that she and his father believed so important. But hideous he certainly did find them. Looking beyond the comfort of Adelaide Lodge, the house at Highgate which John

Suffield had bought some ten years before, Allan saw all that went to produce it—all that was behind the steady, never-failing family income: the earnest application of one man to business, the sure but certain cutting out of extraneous interests; the dredging of life of all but "essentials." Books and art in this world of competition were luxuries. You could afford but little of them. And from such a world Allan's mind jibbed eternally away, just as Maurice's had done.

With Maurice, however, it had been different. For him there had been the definite path with a definite goal, with which Allan's vague idea of a booky life was simply not comparable. He knew nobody who could help him, and there was the eternal example of Guen who, at nineteen, after two years' steady effort had reached the pinnacle of fame proper to the writer who has had three stories accepted. Two years later the outlook for Allan might have been different, but at seventeen there had certainly been nothing at all but "the firm" or the Comet. Profoundly bored at this stage with the present, he had at times a desperate dreadful vision of the future as a frantic clutching at the skirts of leisure. And it was leisure he wanted: leisure in which to live; not money at all or a comfortable home. At twenty his contempt for money was enormous.

Guen thought he was wrong. Her contempt was not for money but for the money standard, and she laughed at Allan's vague notions of life in a book-lined cottage on nothing at all. For Guen loved not only books, but theatres and the London streets and shops and Mudie's and picture-galleries. These things didn't "go" with a cottage in the wilds on nothing at all.

"You only think you'd like the cottage and nothing," she told Allan, "because you don't want to be bothered with the other side of life to which all these things belong. And you *must* be bothered. Somehow, you've got to make them fit in." The trouble was that Allan had no skill at all as a joiner and fitter.

There was, too, the more human question of girls. In the Suffield household there was a legend that Allan did not really know there were any girls in the world beside his sisters and Madeleine Herve. Occasionally others did swim into his orbit, but it was not exactly true to say that Allan actually saw them. They were just people about whom he discovered

the most extraordinary things. Of one he would say, "She's the sort of girl who wears furs," or "the sort of girl who doesn't," and asked if he remembered Miss So-and-So would say, "Oh, yes . . . quite well. She can't stand Conrad," or "She says Dickens bores her." "As though it matters what a girl *reads*!" John Suffield would say to his wife. Even Guen was amused—and Guen thought, as Allan did, that what people read mattered tremendously.

That was why he and Guen drew together out of the family circle. Always between them they had this love of literature, their sense of the beauty and value of words, and the itch for scribbling with which both of them had been born. At twenty Allan's hadn't taken him very far: but Guen, two years his senior, had already discovered Antony Gore and America. A year later her first novel appeared and fell like a bombshell into the midst of her family. No one agreed with her point of view but Allan, and upon Allan the effect of the book was enormous. In some queer unexpected fashion it seemed to co-ordinate his ideas and showed him, for the first time, how thoroughly he and Guen agreed upon essentials. They met, here, not only in the pleasant land of words, but out beyond upon the hinterland of ideas. It was an exciting discovery.

Guen Suffield was, on the whole, an extraordinary young woman for an Anne and John Suffield to have had for a daughter. Also, she was an extraordinary young woman to have found in the suburbs. Gore had said so from the first, but Guen was not to be enticed away from them and he grew content, later, to leave her there, "studying the beasts in their lair." By "the beasts" he meant the comfortable middle classes. You gathered he didn't like them overmuch. Neither did Guen. But her seemingly deep and instinctive dislike of this class to which she belonged was very disturbing to her father until he decided that what she said meant nothing, that she was merely "writing." Even then it savoured of disloyalty, which John Suffield, class-conscious and class-proud, found it hard to forgive. He couldn't see, he said, what Guen and Allan were driving at. He did not read Omar, and if he had would not have shared that gentleman's desire to remould this sorry Scheme of Things. To John Suffield the world was, on the whole, very well as it was; he was essentially the strong sane man who prided himself on "seeing life whole," though

he saw, actually, nothing whatever of it save his own little corner, which was all he wanted to see. He had the keen, nimble brain that, in a world of commerce, commands success, and he saw no uneasy connection between his comfortable middle-class existence and the poverty and misery that sat like a curse on the world—though that was not, of course, how John Suffield saw it. He paid Trade Union rates, he would have told you, and it wasn't his workmen, anyway, who lived in hovels. He believed that the rock bottom ambition of everybody living—for which they would willingly give up all other—was to get rich. What the malcontents resented was not capitalism, but the simple fact that *they* were not capitalists.

"Good God, Anne!" he said. "Do these children of yours want to turn the world upside down?"

They said they did, and then, in nineteen-fourteen, the war came and did it for them. But they weren't grateful. They said the war was no good at all to them . . . that they hated it.

"The war's only going to turn things over. That's no good. The things that matter will get shelved: the rest'll just settle down again—and people'll be too knocked about to care. The war won't settle *anything*, father."

"It'll settle the Germans, anyway," John Suffield had said.

But in nineteen-fourteen it looked as though it might, incidentally, settle a good many other people as well!

4

It was Tom Warren who professed to regard the war as an opener of doors—a means of escape—and Guen hated him for it. But especially she hated him when he said playfully to Allan, "Well, you never liked the office, did you, old chap? This may be a way out." Unfortunately, however, Allan hated the war even more than he had hated the Insurance Office: he hated it because it was stupid and unnecessary, and because of what it could do, not to him, but to other people. When he said that Guen knew he was thinking of Maurice, to whom already things were happening—all the usual unpleasant things that always happen to young men who, in war time, make the mistake of taking the New Testament too literally. The sight of Maurice, who never went to church and to whom the bishops

were anathema, taking his stand, these days, by the Sermon on the Mount was a fit sight, Allan said, for tears. Certainly there were times when he nearly came to them. Allan agreed that the Sermon on the Mount was the finest moral code extant—which was the very reason why he would not have attempted to act upon it. No modern system run on the lines of the Sermon on the Mount would last ten hours, war or no war; and individuals who tried it would find themselves in prison, or a lunatic asylum, in far less time than that. And prison was just where Maurice eventually did find himself. That, said John Suffield darkly, was what ideas did for you!

Allan's ideas, however, took him (and earlier, in nineteen-fifteen) into the Army as a private. He went off to camp, taking with him the memory of Madeleine's pale face and the look of the Spaniards Road, white and hard beneath the February moon. Taking something else, too, that hurt more and lasted longer—the sound of Maurice Linton's voice as he had shaken his hand and wished him luck. And what it had said.

"I'm going on, old chap—in the opposite direction."

And Allan had known, somehow, that the road was darker even than his own. . . .

5

In the following November Allan had gone out to France—just a week after Madeleine's brother Reg had been killed at Ctesiphon. It was a miserable time. One would not talk of it at all if Allan had not, miraculously, lived through it, and if it did not happen that the attitude of people to the war was, in some sense at least, their attitude to everything else.

Allan was never one of those people who talked of the justice or righteousness of the war. (These were not terms he would have applied to any war.) But he did want to help to get it over. His quarrel with Maurice's position was that if you objected to war you must also object (when there was no war) to all the things that went to produce it. You ought, at least, to have done something to stop the Juggernaut. And most people had done nothing of the sort. Maurice himself had done nothing—beyond cutting himself off from his life of inherited comfort and going to live in a garret with a paint box. It wasn't the same thing as fighting, of course, but then

Maurice had never pretended it was. At least in the garret one could think, and the desire to fight might come later when one could fight, perhaps, to some purpose. . . . But Allan hadn't even cut himself off: he had betaken himself not to a garret, but down to the street of commerce. He had "accepted" things. To the same degree he "accepted" the war and to the same degree he hated it.

Perhaps it was because Guen agreed with him that she found the courage to finish her new book, though she felt like Jane Austen writing her quiet novels amid the turmoil of the Napoleonic wars. . . . Wrapped in her armour-plate determination to think of the war as little as possible, Caryl worked steadily for her "matric," her mind on a "first." She never mentioned the war and never seemed to listen to others who did; but that proved nothing, and there were mornings when Caryl came down to breakfast with tell-tale eyes. For all that, she secured her "first." The summer of nineteen-sixteen was a difficult time. With Jan still going to and fro on his father's business, it was all hideously like the old familiar life, save that it was punctuated with Allan's letters which (like Caryl) never mentioned the war and with theirs to him, which scarcely mentioned it either. They gave him what they knew he wanted; raised for him the curtain behind which so much of the old world had got bundled. It didn't even matter that what they showed him was rather broken and battered. Things like that didn't, to Allan, who could always build them up anew for himself.

6

It was Guen who went to hear Maurice state his case to the local Tribunal. It was hopeless, of course, from the first, with Maurice taking his stand like that on the Sermon on the Mount and not so much as a church membership to show! According to the puzzled old gentlemen of the Tribunal if you *really* believed in the Sermon on the Mount you went to church. Maurice, on the contrary, insisted that it was the one really valid reason for staying away. This was beyond the old gentlemen, who seemed depressed about things and had nothing at all to suggest when the Military Representative said, "I'm afraid, sir, we must have this man!"

They had him, though not very usefully. He was arrested just a week later, during Allan's first "leave," and Guen had loathed them because they couldn't arrange things better. Even Caryl, looking at Allan's white face, was moved to tears. They were a miserable seven days, and everyone was relieved when they came to an end.

Presently, during the summer, Anne Suffield developed "nerves" over the Zeppelin raids and fled with her protesting family to Teddington, where in the blue and gold weather Guen saw her new book through the Press and punted her mother up through the lock to Kingston. The winter was a gap, with one bright gleam at the end of it in April when Allan came home again on leave and saw Maurice Linton's face, though behind bars, for a while. Madeleine was at Rottingdean with the Osentons, so that Allan and she did not meet until the October when Allan had his leg injured at Passchendaele Ridge and came home for good.

7

Limping a little Allan got back presently to his Insurance Office, and for the first time in his life found in himself a positive grain of gratitude for the existence of that institution. Here at the beginning of nineteen-eighteen he showed more sign of that "settling down" process than ever before, and his father—never able to understand Allan's disinclination to "come to grips with life"—began to talk complacently, though not to Allan, of the good the war had done him. The correspondence, too, with Madeleine, away there in the Isle of Wight, was not lost upon John Suffield, who believed in marriage as another of the means whereby the nonsense is knocked out of young people with too many "ideas." Allan, John Suffield said to his wife, was "moving along." To his standards, he meant, and to his conception of what a young man should be, as perhaps Anne Suffield knew.

Actually, however, Allan was not "moving along" at all, but standing still. His attitude to life at this stage was best expressed, perhaps, by the phrase *Carpe diem*, and certainly that other—the dream and the business—epitomised it. The undisciplined child in Allan that had cried out for the dream had been dragged through the war, and though the war, miracu-

lously, had not killed it, something, certainly, had happened to it. Silent now, and unassertive, it gave Allan no trouble at all, so that though he still saw life as an adventure beckoning from the edge of things, and himself as a prisoner within four walls, he was strangely able to bear it. For, at the moment, he had had enough of adventure. He was tired. The dull houses, dull people and dull jobs to which he had returned were so many sedatives, and sedatives, at the moment, were what he wanted most. Goodness knows how long he would have continued to want them or how long this interval of serenity would have lasted if it had been left to itself. But it was not left to itself. Suddenly, into the middle of it was flung the news of Maurice Linton's death in prison—which not only smashed up Allan's little patch of serenity, but for a time withered and devastated the universe.

A month later, when he stumbled out of his misery and a little blindly began to pick up again the threads of his life, a passionate anger took hold of him. Maurice had turned his back contemptuously upon the juggernaut and the juggernaut had crushed him. But there was worse in it than that. There had been those who had watched the juggernaut at work—who hadn't lifted a hand to save the man who was being crushed, who thought, perhaps, that he deserved his fate. That was what Allan hated most—the callous swinging-by of an indifferent world. Contemplating it, his old air of quiet detachment dropped from him. He began to plunge into movements and local "protest" meetings, and helped to pass resolutions and gave a good deal more money to the Cause of Progress than he could afford. But with the hot weather (when even the Cause of Progress showed a tendency to slow down) Allan emerged, looking, Guen thought, rather like an automatic figure jerked by invisible wires and mouthing the word "democracy." The feverish phase passed and a quieter Allan sat down to clarify his opinions. The result was the beginning of a novel; several bitter poems and two satires in free verse. The satires, later, found their way into a slim volume with others, like-minded; the bitter poems appeared one by one in Antony Gore's *Life and Letters*, and the novel was never finished. Somehow Allan lost faith in it when Guen shook her head over it and said he was only interested in what his characters believed about the Cause of Progress, that as persons

he didn't care about them at all. This was so true that Allan gave up the rôle of novelist with percipitancy and got back to his satires.

And there Guen encouraged him. She thought that this age had failed miserably because it had produced no real satirist—no Dryden, no Byron, no Jonathan Swift.

There was another thing, too, that resulted from Allan's many meetings and his attempts to clarify their effect upon him—and that was a general understanding that at the next election Allan would vote Labour. He was certainly "moving along." Unfortunately, however, from John Suffield's point of view, he was moving in quite the wrong direction.

CHAPTER FOUR

1

IF, as Jan had suggested, Lieutenant Ancell had really had doubts as to Roberta's honesty, he was mistaken, for two mornings after the incident of the rain the things Guen had lent her were returned.

"Well, she's been quick enough!" Jan said, recognizing the handwriting on the label.

Rather too quick, it seemed, because after breakfast Allan came across his sister in the bath-room dropping the contents of Roberta's misshapen parcel into the dirty linen basket, for Roberta had been in such a hurry to show herself honest she had not stayed to show herself fastidious. Guen's clothes had been returned unlaundered. She caught Allan's eye and she laughed. Allan, however, did not, and Guen laughed again—not this time at herself, but at Allan, whose face was positively funny in its intensity. As though it mattered! She shrugged her shoulders and began to fold up the brown paper, not seeing the little note which slipped out from it on to the floor. Allan went on with the business of washing his hands, wondering why he should mind so much that that sort of habit should go with that sort of face, and why he wanted Guen to go out without seeing Roberta's note down there on the floor.

She did presently, with a word of warning to Allan about the time. He stooped down, recovered the note and read it. A moment later he screwed it up and pushed it down into his coat pocket. It could not, he decided, be shown to Guen because it would amuse her, and somehow or other he had to shield Roberta from the amusement of his family. They would smile at her note as they had smiled when she had said sweetly, "And who is Emily Brontë?" or when they said afterwards that her face went oddly with the things she said. . . . Yet there was not so very much wrong with the note except, per-

haps, its ending, and a certain vagueness as to the spelling of "Suffield."

Out there in the roadway Allan fished it out again and read it once more before tearing it into fragments and tossing it into the gutter. He watched the October wind whirl the white pieces round and round before scattering them broadcast; and as he walked on to the station he felt pleased and triumphant, as though in some absurd fashion he had saved the writer of that poor little note from something that might have hurt her. From what? From Guen's funny little trick of raised eyebrows and shoulders, from her faint, amused smile that he knew she wouldn't be able to help? Why did he care what Guen thought of this girl he had only seen for a moment, whom he never expected to see again and who had never heard of Emily Brontë? The girl was a fool, of course. Why on earth did he mind that Guen should show that she thought so, too—a fool of not too delicate perceptions, who couldn't write English and couldn't spell what passed for it? "I am, Yours truly. . . ." How Jan would have laughed if he had got hold of it!

2

But Jan laughed enough as it was—and for reasons of his own.

"Did she wash 'em?" he asked Guen when she came down from the bath-room and Guen had said, "No . . . I suppose it's ridiculous that I should have liked her better if she had. . . ."

"Oh, hang it all!" Jan said, "she does have a cold bath every morning."

"You've made enquiries on the subject, I suppose?" Guen had asked. But Jan had retreated behind his *Morning Post*.

"Oh, well . . . she looked as though she did, anyhow!" he said and smiled a little, as though at his own perspicacity, but really because he could hear Roberta saying it. "Oh, hang it all, I do have a cold bath every morning!"

She had sat opposite him only the evening before in a little Soho restaurant and had smiled at him over her glass of Graves. This meeting was the explanation of that "To-morrow then, that's settled!" which Madeleine had overheard on the thres-

hold of the Mount Calm drawing-room. Jan, due to return to Camp on the Wednesday, did not believe in missing an opportunity. And Roberta, sipping her wine, told him that she had that afternoon taken his sister's belongings to the post. "So she'll see I'm honest, anyway," she said. And Jan had said teasingly, "I hope you washed 'em!"

"Washed them? Why, there wasn't time. After all, I only wore them home. Of course, I changed *at once*. . . . Besides . . . oh, hang it all, I do have a cold bath every morning!"

Jan had laughed and laughed. It was so screamingly funny, somehow, that she shouldn't know that Guen would care so much less about that fine virtue of honesty than about this lesser one of *finesse*. People were absurd about their skins, of course. . . . Guen with her "I'd have liked her better if she had," and Roberta with her comic insistence on her morning tub.

He had sobered down presently and eaten his dinner, after which he secured a taxi and took Roberta down to the Coliseum. Roberta had no sort of objection whatever to taxis—nor any objection, either, it seemed, to Jan's arm round her waist nor to a stray kiss or two. They make you comfortable in the stalls at the Coliseum and provide just the sort of amusement Jan and Roberta enjoyed. Nothing highbrow, thank you very much, for them. Later, when the "show" was over (Roberta called it that, carelessly, in the approved fashion of the initiate) they agreed they had had a very jolly evening.

"We'll have another next time I'm up," Jan said. "Rotten luck I go back to-morrow."

Trifles like unwashed linen and badly-written letters were not likely to upset Jan. His uses for Roberta were quite unconnected with laundries or grammar. Besides, if it came to that, Guen had a good deal more money to spend on laundries than Roberta had.

Guen would have agreed. It wasn't that at all, of course, but only that a thing of this sort somehow stamped one. You couldn't get away from it. It was like picking your teeth at the meal table or coming down to breakfast with a divorce between your blouse and skirt and your hair in curling pins. They argued, all of them, some want in the woman who could be guilty of them—some lack of personal nicety. It was diffi-

cult to explain. You only knew that no woman who valued her self-respect would do them . . . that you would hate to do them yourself.

But Roberta cared very little about that vague and unfriendly virtue of self-respect. Perhaps, at heart, she cared for nothing very much save other people's admiration, for that was what she lived by—and on. It was a sort of mental and bodily pabulum, and she concentrated only on the things which produced it. Her future, as she knew, depended upon her raising someone's admiration sufficiently to get the someone to marry her. The idea of marriage was disturbing: but you couldn't, if you were a woman, have everything. . . .

Not that Jan intended to marry her. That young man, indeed, saw marriage as a wholly supererogatory ceremony in life with nothing whatever to recommend it. He found other ways of putting this belief, however, when Anne Suffield hoped audibly that her sons, when the war was over, would marry and settle down. Jan would smile and throw her a fond glance. "All right, mater. When I see anybody half as nice as you, I will."

It sounded very well—and Anne Suffield loved it. She thanked God she had such good sons. But perhaps she thanked Him especially for Jan, who never gave you the dreadful feeling of futility that oppressed you, sometimes, with Allan. Jan was a crystal vase. Nothing was hidden. He neither worried nor disturbed you. Anne Suffield, true to her class and tradition, did not want to be disturbed or worried. No wonder that, in her heart, she loved Jan best, even if she were too good a mother to admit it.

3

Jan, of course, was one of the first people to get out of the Army after the signing of the Armistice. Nobody was at all surprised that he took immediate advantage of that blessed word "pivotal," which no one could define, but which, like somebody's pen, was a boon and a blessing to men!

Jan shook the war from his shoulders as a dog shakes water. The Armistice was signed and the war over. (It irritated him when Allan said it wasn't.) He had done his bit and wanted to be allowed to forget it. So Jan bought a couple of new

suits and went out in the evenings to meet a lot of other people similarly minded. He thought it about time that his parents turned out the Canadians who were living in their house at Highgate. He was never an enthusiast for the great London river, and besides, just now, Highgate would have suited all his arrangements a good deal better than Teddington. But the distance between Teddington and Highgate was made the excuse for his non-appearance at dinner at least one evening a week, and for the occasional nights when he didn't come home at all. It was much more comfortable, so he said, to have a meal out and go across for "a game with the boys over North." Jan was an ardent billiard-player, but his mother thought he let the "game with the boys" go on far too late.

"I'm sure you don't get enough sleep," she would say, looking at him for traces of the truth of her remark and sometimes, but not always, finding them. It used to amuse Jan.

"Don't you worry, old lady," he would say, "I'll look after that all right."

You couldn't help feeling that Jan "got enough" of most things in the world—of all the things, anyway, that he thought worth while. There were a good many of them.

4

November, in nineteen-eighteen, was a dull month in spite of London's Day of Rejoicing and the crowd that gathered outside Buckingham Palace and shouted that it wanted the King. Madeleine was in the Isle of Wight, writing occasionally to Guen, but never to Allan; and somehow the knowledge that she never intended to write to him again made life very flat. December was better, because there was the excitement of the coming election, the political meetings that preceded it—and the results, which Allan did not find exciting at all.

Christmas came and was disappointing in the way that only Christmas can be. It passed, and January came, fine and mild and engaging. Towards the end of it Anne Suffield had a birthday, and coming out of a shop one evening in Oxford Street from purchasing a handbag Guen thought she might like, Allan came face to face with Roberta.

At first Roberta looked annoyed. Allan had come out of the shop in a hurry and had cannoned with some force against her

shoulder. In the midst of his apologies came mutual recognition.

"Hullo!" he said, and then, somehow, could think of nothing at all to say. The blood surged up into his face; he felt very foolish. Roberta, however, smiled the pretty smile she kept for young men and held out her hand.

"My word!" she said, "surprises *do* happen and no mistake. But I mustn't stop a minute. I'm meeting a friend and I'm late already. Men *hate* to be kept waiting, don't they?"

Allan said vaguely that he supposed they did. His intelligence had not drifted back to him, or if it had was occupied in thinking that here, on this bitter night, she looked even lovelier than when he had seen her before. She was well-dressed, too, in an excellently cut coat with a deep fur collar. And she looked gay—as though life, since he had seen her last, had been very kind to her.

"I can't stop—reely I can't," she said, as Allan showed some inclination to linger. "I've got a dinner on—and a theatre." She smiled again and was affable. Allan found her wonderful to look at. All Oxford Street faded into insignificance before the warmth and glow and colour that was Roberta. To Allan, tired and jaded from the day's dull work, it was like a tonic just to look at her.

"Come to a theatre with *me* one evening, will you?" he asked, and for the first time he seemed to hear himself speaking. His voice sounded unfamiliar, and what he said ridiculous, for, of course, he didn't want to take Roberta to a theatre. She would bore him to death. You couldn't sit and stare at a girl all the evening without saying something, and what on earth did you find to say to a girl who had never heard of Emily Brontë? But Roberta was already accepting.

"All right," she said, "if I can choose the play."

Again his unfamiliar voice saying unfamiliar things.

"Of course. When shall it be?"

She considered. "Not to-morrow. I must have my beauty sleep. What about the day after—Thursday?"

"Right-o. What time?"

"Seven?"

"Make it six-thirty, then we can eat something somewhere. . . . You want to get on, don't you? Let me walk with you."

"No, no thank you, I'm not going your way at all. Besides, I'm in a hurry, too."

"Not now."

Allan fancied that her colour deepened, that her eyes hardened and he left his face and searched the roadway.

"Do you mind?" she said. "I think I'd better get this . . . Thursday. Six-thirty at the Circus, Central Station Tube. Good-bye!"

The bus was stopping to set down a passenger. Roberta stepped on the footboard, waved her hand and was gone.

"Well, I'm damned!" Allan said and walked on with his slightly perceptible limp. But all the way home his blood was hot in his veins and a pulse beat fiercely against his ribs. The image of Roberta tortured his brain which yet he recalled the whole episode as an oddity there was no accounting for. And he wanted to account for it. It couldn't be merely that Roberta was good to look at: he had met many girls who were that, girls whom Guen and Jan had called "pretty" or "some," and he felt they would know. And yet what else was there about Roberta which attracted him? She hadn't any charms: she wasn't interested in things or ideas and was usually very ill-read. His life and hers didn't touch at any point at all—it was inconceivable that they ever could! And yet the mere part of him over which he had no control had asked to spend an evening with him! He would be expected to entertain and make himself agreeable. And all he wanted to do was to sit still and look at her. The situation was absurd. It was vaguely disturbing.

Nothing else, too, was disturbing—the knowledge that for the first time in his life there was something he could not tell. He had it got, somehow, everlastingly in the way of all the things he could. It ought to have been quite simple to say "I miss Leigh to-day in Oxford Street." But it wasn't. It was a fact, so difficult that he couldn't even attempt it. Coincidence was the most ridiculous thing. Yet if Guen hadn't asked him to collect that handbag he would never have met Roberta, for one didn't walk down Oxford Street for pleasure. It was a street he loathed, yet de Quincey had walked up and down it with his Ann. That, somehow, ought to have made a difference than it did.

Even if coincidence would explain his encounter with

Roberta, it certainly wouldn't explain that invitation to the theatre. Nothing really explained that.

Jan that night did not come home. They had all gone to bed, leaving the door unbolted, and in the morning it was unbolted still. At breakfast Anne Suffield was mildly concerned with the results of this infatuation for billiards, and her husband, less mildly, with the shortcomings of the South Western time-table.

Jan was home in the early afternoon, however, loaded with apologies and parcels and with theatre-tickets in his pocket for some performance that evening. He hoped they had guessed he had missed the train: he had meant to wire and had been so busy it had slipped his memory. He thanked God for Bloomsbury and the Waverleys. They did you very well, those Waverley people.

It was Anne Suffield who suggested that when they got back to Highgate they might have a billiard-table fixed up. "Jan's so fond of his game," she said. And John Suffield didn't see why not at all. "It wouldn't do *me* any harm to have a quiet game occasionally. And I daresay Jan wouldn't mind giving me a lesson or two."

"Not at all, sir. Delighted!" Jan said.

He was really a most admirable son. You would never have guessed from his manner that a billiard-table "in the family" was about the last thing he wanted—or meant to have. The supreme and resistless merit of the game was that you played it in other people's houses. Because for Jan billiards was less a game than an explanation. There was, in fact, nothing at all that you couldn't explain by it. That "game with the boys" saved a deal of trouble all round, for it was a legend in which everybody believed. Even Guen.

5

It was Allan of all unlikely people who suspected it first. It began the next morning by Allan's finding a lace handkerchief on the floor of the hall and by Jan's appearance as he was examining the border for a clue to its owner.

"It's not the girls'," he said, "because of the scent." Both Caryl and Guen detested perfumery.

"It's all right," Jan said, "I know whose it is. Rather nice that scent. . . . Amami, isn't it?"

"Don't ask me!" said Allan, and laughing they went in to breakfast. They were alone that morning. Guen and Caryl (both bad risers) were not yet down, and Mrs. Suffield after her theatre was breakfasting leisurely in bed.

"You're quite a stranger," Allan said, pushing an uninteresting post on one side. "I hear you missed your train on Tuesday."

"You can put it like that if you like," Jan said.

"Like what?" asked Allan. "Don't be a silly ass."

"Oh, it's all right, old chap. You needn't go off the deep end. It was only a theatre and a girl and supper afterwards. You're so damn Puritanic."

There was a little silence. A queer, unaccountable constraint had settled upon Allan which was three parts distaste. It was not what Jan said, but his manner of saying it, as though he invited you to tear away the veils; to read into that legend of billiards and lost trains whatever you chose. "You can put it that way if you like!" But Allan didn't like. Something in him was hurt and smarted horribly. . . . But he reacted presently from his own distaste. What a fuss about nothing! As though he hadn't known for years that Jan was for ever carting some girl about. Jan was made that way; he would philander at sixty.

"It's a pity *you* don't pop off to a theatre more often, old chap," Jan told him now. "Do you a world of good."

It was Thursday—the day of his appointment with Roberta. Allan blushed.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I'm going to see something or other to-night."

"Highbrow or fluff?"

Allan's blush at least did not lessen.

"Well, not 'highbrow,' I should say."

Jan whistled, then laughed—suddenly and explosively.

"You gay dog!" he said. "Ask her if she's seen *Chu Chin Chow*." And again he laughed in that sudden boisterous fashion.

"All right," said Allan. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, oh, nothing!" Jan said, "but you ask her—if she's seen *Chu Chin Chow*."

The sound of Jan's hilarious merriment followed Allan out into the street. He pulled up his coat collar and scowled blackly into the bright face of the January morning, and Alice coming in with Guen's porridge was informed by Jan that the world was a damn-funny place.

"I suppose it is, Mr. Jan—if you come to think of it! I've heard my father say that a sense of humour's a great asset in life."

"Asset's the word, Alice. Asset does you and your father credit. And you can take it from me that a sense of humour's the only thing in life that matters. You may tell a man he's a liar, a scoundrel, a thief, and he won't care a tuppenny damn. But if you tell him he hasn't a sense of humour he'll want to flay you alive. . . ."

"Good morning," said Guen's voice from the doorway. "Allan gone?"

She sat down and began turning over her letters—evidently a dull lot, with the exception of one which she slipped unopened into the pocket of her brown frock. Alice collected Allan's plates and cup and went out.

"Enjoy your play?" Guen asked Jan over the edge of her porridge spoon.

"Rather. I say, Guen, what do you think? Allan's taking a girl to the theatre to-night. . . . Fact."

"Why shouldn't he?"

"Oh, no reason—only, you know, Allan *doesn't*."

"Take girls to the theatre? No, but I wish he would. It would be very nice for him—and for them."

"Oh, I daresay . . . all depends, of course . . ." and Jan shrugged eloquent shoulders.

"Don't be beastly," said Guen. "And how do you know it's a girl to-night? Did he tell you?"

"Allan? Rather not."

"Then how do you know?"

"Well . . . he wanted me to recommend a play. . . . *Verb. sap.*—to quote the classics. I suggested *Chu Chin Chow*. But, of course, it won't be *Chu Chin Chow*."

"Why not?"

"Oh, well . . . the girl's seen it. Sure to have, I mean. Everybody has."

"I haven't."

"Oh, *you!* You don't count. You don't care for the East. You're like the chimney sweep who was shown a photograph of Jerusalem and saw nothing but a sad lack of chimneys. Here, I must be off."

At the door he cannoned into Caryl.

"You seem very gay!" she said.

"Do I? Well, I've heard a lot of funny things this morning. What do you think? Allan's taking a girl to the theatre to-night."

"I don't call that funny. That's merely nice—for the girl." Jan laughed.

"I say, Caryl, do you know a chap named Merrick—Richard Merrick?"

"Of course. He's a friend of the Hestons."

"I heard yesterday that he's very fond of a little girl named Caryl Suffield!"

Sudden colour burned Caryl's face and neck a deep red as she came across to the table.

"What rot!" she said. "Who told you that?"

"Jack Heston. He seemed pretty sick about it. I met him in Cheapside. . . . We had lunch together."

Caryl became nasty.

"I always understood," she said, "that Jack Heston was wounded in the leg. And I think it's time you caught your train."

Still laughing Jan went.

CHAPTER FIVE

1

ALLAN got down punctually to the Oxford Street Tube, but Roberta was late. She usually was—on principle, believing that it “did a man good” to wait for a girl; showed him that she wasn’t “falling over herself” for his favours. So Allan, unaware that he was being carefully put in his place, bought an evening paper to help pass the time it was taking Roberta to do it. But he discovered that he was too excited to read anything except a column on the weather, which told him that it was the coldest day of the year; that ice lay on the ponds at Bushey Park three-quarters of an inch thick; and that the thermometer at Hampton Court registered eleven degrees of frost. Somehow these facts made the air at Oxford Circus Tube station colder than before. The rising and plunging of the lifts made horrible draughts: Allan turned up his coat collar and moved over to the bookstall to escape them. The home-bound crowd surged on and on—presumably everybody lived on the Central London Tube. Every now and then somebody planked down a penny and asked for a paper, and turning away again bumped hard into Allan’s shoulder. They said “Sorry” and Allan “Granted” until he got tired of it. Sorry and granted! What a vocabulary! The automatic ticket-machines made a hideous noise, and all the people who used them seemed to want to see how violently they could manipulate the apparatus which tirelessly belched forth tickets. Two girls at a cigarette kiosk discussed a recent dance they had been at together and seemed to think Allan was interested in it, too. People came in and looked at the clock, then went out again and looked at the street. (Evidently other folk were late, too!) The plaintively affectionate voices of the flower-sellers at the street corner floated in to him. “Vilets, dearie? All fresh . . . vilets?” He took out his paper again and stamped his feet, but the paper reeked of unpleasant happen-

ings—a resumed inquest on an actress who had died from an overdose of cocaine; comment on the fighting in the Berlin streets and more talk of the deaths of Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. The sight of their names in print sent a wave of pity through Allan. He wondered if they knew, now, how much their effort and suffering was worth, whether it was worth anything at all or whether, for those two restless souls, it was, at the last, just the quiet and the dark. . . . But here the London crowd surged on its after-the-war way, in search of gaiety and the youth that one had supposed dead! And Allan who had lived through unspeakable things waited here in the cold for a girl who had caught him somehow by a pretty face . . . a girl who couldn't (even on such a night!) manage to get there to time. It was a strange world!

Then Roberta came.

"Hallo!" she said. "Not late, am I?"

"Fifteen minutes," said Allan, and then, looking at her his anger melted.

"It's all right," he said, "now you've come."

He felt it was! Nothing, now, seemed to matter. He piloted her through the crowd, down the street to the Marguerite for dinner. He was cold no longer, for the hot blood coursed through him like a river in full flood: his face and neck burned and he wished he didn't limp. Roberta however, rather liked it. As early as this in nineteen-nineteen a young man who limped was an object of interest to the passers-by and of pride to the young woman he escorted.

Allan found it better sitting down. He did not talk much, but he listened to what Roberta said, though without hearing very much of it. It was strangely exciting, somehow, to sit opposite to her and he was filled with a vague pleasure because her face showed no more than the merest dusting of powder that Guen's might have exhibited. Allan detested the modern craze for cosmetics. It made a girl look as though she had been turned out with hundreds of others in a factory—and to one colour-scheme. Roberta did not make up: but then Roberta did not need to. She was the lucky possessor of a flawless skin: neither sun nor wind, heat nor cold had the least effect upon it. To Allan it was a perfectly wonderful phenomenon. Good skins appealed to him as years ago (perhaps still) they appealed to his father. Roberta had taken

off her coat and sat clad in a gauzy frock of pale blue, cut wide on the shoulders and with short sleeves—a ridiculous frock (even under the warm coat) for one who travelled by Shanks's pony and the omnibus. And her shoes were ridiculous, too, and what she said, so that you had to keep looking at her face and her wonderful hair to stand her conversation. Certain words like "awfully" and "dreadfully" and "naturally" came out with appalling regularity, and certain phrases. She seemed to have a working vocabulary of about fifty words. And Allan found himself trying to remember how many Shakespeare was reputed to have had and Milton and a lot of other people Roberta had probably never heard of! But she had a sense of humour—uncertain, perhaps, and limited, but in good working order. So that Allan stopped thinking about the dead and their vocabularies to reflect that Roberta was, in her way, quite clever. He discovered, too, that Guen had been right about the photographs on the tube. Roberta had gone to Hilmer Roydon's studio to help in "touching up" processes, to interview clients and to make appointments for them; but had stayed to be photographed.

"You wouldn't believe how tired you get of having your photograph taken," she said. "And it's awfully dull at the studio now Tommy's gone. . . . Oh, you needn't look like that; it's all right, Tommy's a girl. Ethel May her real name is; Ethel May Carew, but since she left to go on the pictures she calls herself Tommy. She got the second prize in a kinema competition. P'raps you read about it in the Sunday papers? (Allan hadn't.) I think she's awfully clever. But mother doesn't like her; she never approves of my friends. No, reely. She's always on to me to drop Tommy. . . . I say, what play are we going to see!"

"I thought," Allan stammered, "I thought, perhaps, *Chu Chin Chow* . . . if you haven't seen it."

Roberta had. He saw that at a glance before she said, "Oh, you *haven't* bought the tickets?" Allan's face seemed to be slipping beyond his control. Even his voice seemed not to belong to him as he murmured something about having only 'phoned the box office. "Oh, then that's all right," Roberta said, "we needn't collect 'em. Can I have an ice? I hope they won't rush you."

He didn't care if they did. He felt he had been rushed

already; could hear again Jan's boisterous laughter and his, "Ask her . . . if she's seen *Chu Chin Chow*."

Certainty descended upon him. It was Jan who had taken Roberta to see *Chu Chin Chow* on Tuesday. It was Jan she had been going to meet on Tuesday evening when he nearly knocked her down coming out of that shop in Oxford Street. The thought stayed with him, kept him quiet in the taxi that took them down to the play Roberta had elected to see. He was horribly conscious of her sitting there with her mocking roguish air; conscious, too, that she was thinking him a "mug" because he made no effort to kiss her, because he sat stiffly and awkwardly at her side, not touching her.

She was, of course, though her mood was comparative; she was thinking less of Allan than of Jan, of whom Allan in some perverse way kept reminding her. Anybody could see, she would have said, that they were brothers, only Jan was *ever* so much better looking! But a mere family likeness! What was that beside these greater (and fundamental) differences she discerned between them? You knew where you were with Jan, and he would have seen to it that riding in a taxi was not the dull business it was with Allan.

2

The play Roberta had chosen was an exclamation mark and probably no worse than others of its class. Certainly it didn't bore Allan half as much as he had expected—probably because he wasn't thinking very much about it. He was thinking that Roberta, for all she had for him this queer fascination, though she stirred his pulses and his emotions as no other girl had done, was not for him. She didn't "link" up. They didn't even speak the same language. What *could* they possibly have in common? He had been mad . . . to think they could have—even for an evening. You could not imagine so impossible a friendship going on. It *wasn't* going on, of course. This was the beginning and the end. He was horribly level-headed about it, as though some part of his brain stood aside and condemned the failure of the rest. But when the piece was over he suggested supper. Roberta refused.

"I daren't," she said. "I get into such an awful row if I'm late. . . . Mother's so strict. Thanks awfully, all the same."

"When shall I see you again?" he asked as he put her into her North London bus.

Roberta smiled back at him from the step of it.

"Oh, I don't know. . . . I'm dreadfully full up, reely. Drop me a card to the Studio."

She liked saying "to the Studio." It made people look at her with a keener interest, even if, in their minds, they dubbed her "Artist's model."

"But I don't know the address," Allan began.

"Oh, turn it up in the telephone book. . . ."

"'Old tight!" said the conductor, and rang his bell. His manner said as plainly as possible that the step of a bus and at this time of night was no place for a conversation of this sort. The bus moved on and left Allan standing on the curb staring after it. Half-way across Waterloo Bridge he found he had only ten minutes in which to catch his last train. No wonder that on Tuesday Jan had lost it. The wonder was that anybody ever caught it.

Jan was still up when Allan arrived home, and roused himself to inquire after the success of his evening.

"By the way, old chap, *had* she seen *Chu Chin Chow*?"

Unexpectedly Allan lost his temper.

"You know quite well that you took her to see it yourself last Tuesday evening," he said. "Why the devil do you think it necessary to keep this up?"

"My dear old chap! Keep what up?"

"This pretence that you don't know it's Roberta Leigh I've been to the theatre with this evening . . . that she didn't tell you I met her and asked her on Tuesday evening."

"Oh, that's all right! I thought you didn't *want* me to know, you were so deep about it. Was she nice to you?"

"Nice? I suppose she was. I haven't thought about it."

Jan laughed.

"No, you wouldn't have to, with Bobbie. As a matter of fact, when you're with her you don't think of anything else except how damn pretty she is. Did it take you like that? You get used to it in time."

"Have you got used to it?"

"Oh, more or less . . . but then, I'm not such a silly ass about a pretty girl as you are. You're so damn serious. Pretty

girls don't like it. If you take 'em out you should play the game."

"What is the game?"

"Didn't Bobbie show you?"

"What the devil do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing—a kiss or two . . . you know. *Quite* harmless, I assure you. Little Bobbie Leigh can take care of herself. She knows her way about very well indeed, does Bobbie! Besides . . . mother's so strict. Did she tell you that?"

Allan had been stirring the cup of cocoa which Alice left habitually on the hob for late comers, but he was smitten now by a distaste for it. Again, in that queer fashion of the morning, the veils were torn asunder and life showed, beastly. Even after the Army, it made Allan feel sick, because—this wasn't the Army. There was more, too, than that—more than his mere personal revulsion, for unexpectedly his thoughts had moved on. . . . Why, it was on Tuesday night that Jan hadn't come home. . . . He remembered his explanation. . . . "Only a theatre and a girl and supper afterwards." Oh, it couldn't be. You couldn't believe *that* of Roberta. All the same, Allan felt suddenly stifled and oppressed; had, for one moment, an insane desire to throw Alice's cocoa into Jan's handsome, smiling face. Then the feeling passed. He was only cold and tired, and he thought of nothing save that cocoa was a simply beastly concoction and that somebody ought to tell Alice of leaving it about like that.

"I'm going to bed!" he said.

"I should, old chap. And you give it up. A fast life doesn't agree with you. Legs and bosoms and backs don't go with your temperament, and it's a pity to spoil it. Next time you make Bobbie go to something highbrow. Do her good."

"Oh, shut up," said Allan. "There isn't going to be any next time."

This seemed to amuse Jan, for as he knocked out his pipe against the edge of the fender, he smiled.

"My dear old chap," he said, "I wouldn't be rash, if I were you."

"Oh, go to hell!" said Allan.

CHAPTER SIX

1

AS the days passed it seemed to Allan that there were a thousand things holding him to his resolution not to see Roberta again. There were the things he knew of her, that he had seen for himself, and there were the things he didn't know at all, that he could only guess at, and which were concerned not only with Roberta but with Jan. And, more than all else, perhaps, there were Jan's witticisms.

But in the middle of February these came to an end, for Jan went up to Manchester for "the firm." He did not go too willingly because "it always rained in Manchester," and Jan hated the rain. But on this Monday of mid-February he left behind him a wretchedly wet day and the Thames in flood, and it seemed improbable that even Lancashire could be more depressing, as he told Guen who had come down to the station, with Leader, to see him off. And Leader howled so mournfully when Jan's train moved out of the station that Guen could not hear what it was Jan called out to her. It was probably nothing important, but it worried her in the stupidly persistent way such a thing always does.

When the train had gone she coaxed Leader on to the top of a bus and rode over the bridge into Richmond town, from where she walked up the hill and into the Park. It had stopped raining. A whispering wind was abroad and the afternoon was one tender harmony of green that was light and blue that was shadow.

But it was not these things that remained, later, in Guen's mind, but only that one miserable little fact—that she had not heard what Jan had called out to her.

He was to return on the Friday, but on that evening came a note to the effect that he had gone out to the coast and was spending the week-end at St. Julian's. He would not be home until the Monday evening. But at two o'clock on Monday,

as Anne Suffield was settling down for her afternoon nap, a telegram arrived. It was from St. Julian's, but it was not from Jan, and it said:

"Your son ill. Please come at once. Goodman."

"No answer," Anne Suffield said and stood quite still, holding on to the head of the Chesterfield while Alice sent the boy away and closed the door. Outside it was raining. It seemed to Anne Suffield that she stood there for a century with her eyes on the soft-falling mist of it before she found words.

"Mr. Jan is ill at a place called St. Julian's. . . . We mustn't be frightened. They don't say *very ill*. Get an A.B.C., will you, while I get my things on?"

2

The Mrs. Goodman who had sent the telegram proved a tall, well-dressed woman with an unpleasant trick of looking at you via the bridge of her nose, and an air of resentment against the things which happen to the owners of first-class boarding houses. But she led the way upstairs and gave Anne Suffield what information she had. It didn't amount to much. Influenza and complications, following a sore throat and pain in the side of which Jan had complained on the Saturday night. He ought not, of course, to have gone out: there was a cold wind. But he would go. . . . Mrs. Goodman's whole manner was a protest against people with sore throats and pains in their sides insisting upon going out in the cold. Then she opened a door at the top of the second flight of stairs, and at the sight of the white face on the pillow Anne Suffield's heart contracted. She wanted to shriek at the woman at her side, "Can't you see he's dying?"

She was sure of it: nobody could look like that and live. But he was conscious: he knew her, and he was glad she had come. He said that over and over again, his head on her breast. He never said anything else, and soon he was beyond words altogether.

The doctor came back at ten. It was useless, he said, he could do nothing. Anne Suffield was glad when he went.

Towards morning Jan died.

His mother sat there all through the dawn, never moving. The sound of the sea came up insistent and sad, as though its heart was broken too. And presently, when the post office opened, she went out and sent a telegram:

"Dear Jan died last night. Mother."

3

The telegram, to John Suffield, was like a physical blow. He had not, that morning, gone up to the office, but had waited for news. When it came he was stunned. Allan had already left for town, and it fell to Guen to accompany her father to St. Julian's. Alice, weeping and distracted, packed a handbag for them, and Leader sat disconsolately by it in the hall, as though he wondered why all forsook him and fled. He knew the signs.

It was a bright but showery morning, with fine rain falling at intervals like a film before the sun and blurring all the land. Up the quiet suburban road Jan would never again come walking, nor Leader run, barking, at his side. A thought not so much lacerating as queer. You couldn't, somehow, imagine Jan dead. Despite the "murmuring" heart the Army doctors had given him, he had never been ill in his life. It was absurd he should have died in two days—snuffed out, like a candle in the wind. But on the station she was stricken to the heart by the sudden memory that came to her of Jan shouting from a moving train, something she could not hear.

They caught a fast train at Euston which landed them at St. Julian's about half-past three. Anne Suffield was waiting for them at the station. Her white face and frozen air stabbed at Guen's heart, but, too, they stirred her to effort. Her very years protected her, in a measure, from feeling this thing as her mother and father felt it, for whom there was none of the resilience that was youth. Youth, for Anne and John Suffield, had died with Jan. They would bury it presently in his grave and go on their way without it.

They left things, now that Guen had come, to her; and with a sense of relief she found that they would be able to return on the morrow, and Jan would go with them, very still and perfectly quiet. It was like a cold hand squeezing at

your heart to think of it. The crowded train and the long, polished coffin, with his name on it. . . . Arthur Jannison Suffield.

4

Half an hour after her arrival Guen interviewed Mrs. Goodman in her cold, prim drawing-room that looked out to sea and smelt of furniture polish. Guen felt that good temper was never a strong point with Mrs. Goodman, and she saw that just now what there was of it was being unduly tried. Perhaps her resentment was natural. People who keep boarding-houses do not care for other people to come and die in them. Luckily, as she said to Guen, she had just then but few visitors, because people didn't like a corpse in the house, and were scared of this influenza—at least the doctors called it influenza, but Mrs. Goodman reserved her opinion on the matter. Guen felt she was expected to apologise for Jan—and for death. Between them, Mrs. Goodman, no doubt about it, was seriously inconvenienced. She seemed to have charged something for that in her bill—though it was not that which staggered Guen, but the fact that the bill was made out for two people.

"I don't understand . . ." she began.

"Mrs. Suffield left on Sunday morning, first thing, before Mr. Suffield was taken ill. She had a telegram over-night."

"Mrs. Suffield?"

Guen's face was blank.

"Mr. Suffield was here with his wife, so I *understood*. . . ."

Guen made a superhuman effort and contrived to smile.

"Oh, yes . . . of course . . . I had forgotten. . . ."

She paid the double bill, and while the woman receipted it she struggled to regain composure. The mask of a cold, unmeaning smile slipped over the pink and brown of her face, but the beating of her heart was a fierce pain.

"Would you mind telling me," she said, as she took the receipt and folded it up, "if you have mentioned Mrs. Suffield's visit to my parents."

Mrs. Goodman, miraculously, had not.

"Then I should be obliged," Guen said, "if you would not. It might distress them, just now. You see . . . the marriage . . . was secret. . . ."

"Very well, as you please, of course." Mrs. Goodman's voice was cold with suspicion and her angry resentment. Guen caught her gaze and held it.

"Thank you very much," she said.

When the woman had gone she sat down in a chair by the window and let the meaning of what she had said drift into her mind. It surprised her to find that the thing which really disturbed her was not this knowledge that had come to her, but the fear it should reach her mother. Allan and she between them must see to it that it never did, because she would mind so much; she wouldn't understand. With the impudence of omniscient youth Guen was positive about that. Her mind worked quickly: Allan and she, between them, must save her from the knowledge. There would be Jan's papers and correspondence for which they must make themselves responsible. It could be done. There was no real danger—save that woman's tongue. . . .

She sat up and snatched at a paper as a timid knock came at the door. "Come in," she called softly.

The girl who had brought them tea came in and stood just inside the door. Guen had noticed her then as an under-sized, under-nourished girl of less than twenty, and saw now that she had large pansy-blue eyes in a thin white face, and that her hair, which should have been prettily picturesque, was merely untidy. She was desperately unattractive—even to a feminine eye—but the pansy eyes, like the untidy hair, ought to have been pretty.

"If you please, miss, I wanted to give you this. . . ."

She held out her hand—its fingers clenched tightly over whatever it was she held.

"What is it?" said Guen, "something I've dropped?"

"No, Miss. . . . Something I found . . . after Mrs. Suffield left." | 7 4 4 |

The girl opened her hand and dropped into Guen's a gold ring set with one large ruby. "But how do you know," she asked, "that this belonged to . . . Mrs. Suffield?"

The girl had noticed her wearing it. Besides, she'd left it about before. She used to take it off when she washed her hands. . . .

Guen turned the ring over. It was certainly the sort of thing you'd notice. You'd notice, too, what was written inside

it: *Diana Wells. Keith Barrington Hill. May 20th, 1913.*
To leave a compromising thing like that about!

Guen sat there turning it over in her hands. She was suddenly very tired and her head ached. Twilight was stealing into the room: outside an amber sunset crept over the sandhills: the long grasses waved back, showing their silvery sides. The girl turned to go, dabbing at her eyes with her apron. "I can't bear to think he's dead," she said. "He was so kind to me."

"We used to think he was kind to everybody," Guen told her.

When the girl had gone she sat there, quite still, staring through the window. Beyond it the land was dim. Beneath the paling yellow gleam that was the sunset the silver grasses waved there on the sandhills. The moon was up, chill and small, in a cold, grey sky, painted with that one faint smear of yellow, towards which the restless sea yearned, sighing. The world had shrunk to a microcosm. Everything in it had grown small. Guen herself felt small—and utterly unimportant. The mighty spectacle of Death dwarfed everything else.

At dinner the eyes of the little maid to whom Jan had been kind were red. She looked as though at any moment she would break down and cry into their soup or onto their fish. But Anne Suffield did not see her. She saw nothing but a white face that had death in it.

There were things to do, and later Guen went into the town to do them. It was ten o'clock when she returned and went in to say good-night. Her father and mother were in bed, but not asleep. Side by side they lay there straight and silent, thinking their own thoughts—as they must have done all those years ago before Jan or Pen or any of them were born. She stooped over and kissed them. Nobody spoke, save, just as Guen turned to go, her mother. "Guen, leave the door a little open. . . ."

It was what she had said when they were all little and she was afraid they might want her in the night.

CHAPTER SEVEN

1

THE first thing to do was to tell Allan. Guen saw that: saw, too, that nobody else must know. Not even A.G. Jan was dead and you couldn't go about repeating that story: the idea was revolting. So Allan was told and had shown no surprise at all. Guen had expected surprise, certainly; had looked for everything, anything, but this queer little air of knowledge, detached, cynical.

For Allan had said nothing to Guen—nothing to anybody—of that suspicion which a few weeks before had shot up in his mind like a rocket and died down; instantly, perhaps, but reeking and objectionable. Now, under the spur of Guen's information, it rose again, and with it came the memory of things that years ago men at the office had said to the callow youth he had then been; at which he had reddened and stammered. They must have found him amusing, those middle-aged men, with wives and families and few ideals and fewer illusions, all hinting at their "pasts" and other men's "presents." To practically all of them women were no more than confectionery upon which they glutted their appetites or fed their emotions. Even before the war, though he still cowered inwardly beneath their phrases, beneath their sex jokes and their insistence upon the "beastliness" of life, Allan had learned not to show it. It was an attitude that life in the Army had done much to strengthen. The Army had been informative; the education it gave you in at least one direction was certainly liberal. Among the many things it had taught Allan was the fact that he belonged to a tiny minority, because here, at twenty-six, he was still without sexual experience. His flag of personal chastity flew still at high mast. It waved there, on that evening of Guen's return, in a stiff breeze, so that he saw it, somehow, for the first time, as a thing belonging to and immediately concerned with himself. For the first time,

too, he saw that chastity was a' thing he expected—that he took for granted—not of himself alone, but of others for whom he had affection and respect. He had never before thought about it in this way—definitely, as a hard, strong line of conduct, a green path in a muddy country. He could not bear to have thought of women in the same way some of the men in his battalion had done; his mother, Guen, Madeleine, had stood there as an eternal bulwark, and somehow he had expected that they stood there also for Jan. And they hadn't. In that way they simply hadn't been there at all.

2

On the morning following Jan's funeral there were two letters addressed to him, one from the owner of the ring in Guen's keeping and the other from Roberta. The latter Allan read hastily, then tore it in half and flung it down into the centre of the fire. "Nothing important," he said to Guen, thankful they were breakfasting alone. Nothing important! But from the clean surface of the opposite wall what she had written stared relentlessly back at him:

"I waited over an hour at Piccadilly last night and you never came. I'm so miserable. Please tell me if I've offended you. Yours always, Bobbie."

There was a good deal more of Mrs. Hill's letter, but it affected him differently. None of its sentences wrote themselves on the wall. . . . They were written in a neat, educated hand and signed "Di," and, no two ways about it, "Di" had given herself away altogether. She had even written on paper bearing an embossed address—somewhere in Parson's Green—out Fulham way. They wanted, both of them, not to read it; but they had, somehow, to find out—enough. They found more than enough, though they tried not to look at it too hard. There was something cruel and indecent in this cold calculated reading of a "love-letter" written to a man now cold in his grave. But it had to be done: here and now the thing had to be scotched. There must never be the faintest chance that this woman would write again. . . . The points Allan and Guen were after now were all there: she had

missed none of them. Evidently letter-writing was a form of self-expression with her: she was one of those people who, pen in hand, let themselves "go." Guen guessed that her letters, at times, had probably bored Jan, for neither she nor Allan believed that Jan had taken this affair as seriously as all that. It had none of the saving grace of a *grande passion*.

Mrs. Hill wrote that she had reached home before K.B., after all, thank the Lord. "K.B.," of course, as you'd guessed from the ring, was her husband, Keith Barrington Hill; she wrote his name out in full every now and then, as though that had point, as though they had used it, she and Jan, as a joke between them. K.B., it seemed, not yet demobilised, had come home unexpectedly on leave, and somebody—it was not clear who—had telegraphed the imminence of his arrival. Mrs. Hill's head, so she said, had ached all the way home with thinking of excuses if he had got there first; and when she arrived it ached a good deal more because she found she had lost her ring ("the badge of all my tribe," she called it) and "Keith Barrington" had an observant eye and would notice. That, apparently, was still troubling her peace, though K.B.—yet—hadn't noticed. Her instructions for its return, if Jan had found it, were explicit and did not make pretty reading. (Allan skipped.) She remembered the sore throat and pain in his side and hoped it was better. The rest of the letter went unread: neither Allan, nor Guen presently, had stomach for it. Over an indecent business one could, if one cared, be tolerably decent. Or less blatantly indecent, perhaps. . . .

Guen, too, shirked the final page. She had read enough. Here, as far as this, was her whole case—K.B.'s, too, if ever he got hold of it. But he wouldn't! They—she and Allan—were going to make very sure of that.

"What a fool!" said Allan.

"For having loved Jan?"

"Love!" said Allan.

"You can't judge," Guen said. "I mean, you've no right to judge! None of us has!"

"Oh, I know. One tries not. But it makes me sick. . . . The world's full of this beastliness. Love is a euphemism. . . . Are you going to see this Mrs. Hill?"

"I suppose I must. God knows what I shall find to say to her. I wish I'd never known. . . . I'd rather *never* have known."

"Not you!" said Allan. "You're one of those people who'd always rather know everything. So am I—though I've only just found it out. There are some things I'd give my head to know—for certain."

But he wouldn't. There were some things he would never know. Because Jan was dead and these things that he wanted most to know were mixed up with him and Roberta.

Roberta! He wouldn't think of her. He wouldn't go near her. He hadn't seen her since that night at the theatre. She might go to the devil. And yet those words in her untidy handwriting. He saw them yet. *You never came. I'm so miserable. . . .*

He pushed back his chair and got up. He would be late. Not that it mattered. Chiefs and colleagues were kind at times like these—almost as if they expected you to be late; as if they would be surprised if you came early.

3

Guen did not find courage enough for the journey to Parson's Green until several days later, and by then she and Allan had discovered something else—that this affair with Diana Hill was not the only one with which Jan had enlivened his days. There was nothing to tell how much he had felt—or if he had felt anything at all. The feeling, it seemed, had always been on the side of the women. They wondered, Allan and Guen, how Jan had managed so neatly to steer clear of tragedy; there was no trace of it in any of the letters they found—and there were a good many of them. Was it that the feeling didn't go deep: that, for the girls, as for Jan, these affairs were just "larks," something you indulged in and were never sorry or regretful about afterwards? There were women, they knew, who thought that "larks" of this sort connoted freedom.

Yet the thought of the interview was distressing. She felt instinctively that it was going to be exactly the sort of thing she could not bear. Some people turned sick and faint if they looked upon physical wounds, but to Guen it was always the moral hurt that did the harm: the ordeal of looking on at the brutal murder of someone's self-respect, of courage, honesty and truth. At school once a girl had been expelled

for theft: the code of the head mistress demanded that she be dragged from room to room, made to stand in front of each class while a detailed charge was read out against her. The culprit had not wept nor hidden her face: her attitude was referred to as "brazen," and yet to Guen it was as if she had withered, there before her eyes. The girl who sat next to Guen had begun to cry, and Guen always remembered how she had envied her. So much nicer to be able to cry than to try to suppress this miserable feeling in the pit of your stomach—that warned you that if you didn't get out into the fresh air you'd make a dreadful exhibition of yourself.

It was a weakness which had grown up with her—a tendency to shirk not the physically abhorrent, but the thing that was morally distasteful, that cut at life's essential dignity and decency. Yet, remembering her mother, she would not shirk this time. She set out for the address in Parson's Green given on Diana Hill's embossed note-paper, but as she went the sombre beauty of the February afternoon, with its pageant of pale colour in the sky drawing out already to the west, seemed but to emphasise the ugliness of the scene to which she was going, so that only her strong sense of its absolute necessity drove her on. They had, somehow, to silence Mrs. Hill.

Mrs. Hill's house was called "The Elms"—probably because there were no elms within half a mile of it, but only acacia trees in a neatly-kept front garden. A maid showed Guen into a pink-and-white room that overlooked another garden, whose peace was marred by the passing of trains at the bottom, and presently a tall, dark girl in a lavender frock came in. She was very pale, but you felt that ordinarily her colour was deep and vivid like the heart of a damask rose. She wasn't cordial, yet somehow at the sight of her Guen's courage revived. Aloofly her pride came up and reinforced it. She introduced herself. Mrs. Hill's face seemed to say that she had heard of Guen (as though Jan had boasted of his "clever" sister); it said, too, that she found Guen—like most clever women—not much to look at, and that black was the last colour she ought to have worn.

It was, as Guen had known it would be, an impossible interview. The air was electric with the hostility of this dark, handsome woman whose ring and letter Guen carried in her handbag. Every second the hostility grew—thickened and

ned, until it was suffocating. And Guen could find
ng to say: was utterly bereft of all ideas, all thought,
that it was an offence she should be there at all; an
ge that she had those things in her bag and an indecency
she must say—what she had come to say. Had she
sted this situation in a novel she would have known how
ndle it; faced with the reality in this astounding fashion
could do nothing with it at all. Out of the intolerable
came the sound of Mrs. Hill's voice quivering with pride
enmity, and the sound of her own, saying strange things
didn't believe true, that were like the nails they had put
n's coffin, that hurt somehow in the same dreadful fashion.
when they stopped Mrs. Hill sat down. She sat down
a log and she said nothing for what seemed an eternity. . . .
sat there tearing up the letter Guen had handed her back,
ng as if she were tearing up some little bit of herself. Her
was twisted with misery; its youth had gone, its very
seemed dry and shrunken. The house was very quiet as
ose and threw the torn-up letter into the fire. The white
s leapt at the pieces, drawing them in, so that almost
diately nothing at all remained of Diana Hill's attempt
lf-expression save the few charred scraps of paper that
n the top of her bright wood fire. It had been singularly
ccessful.

Guen it was all dreadful and revolting and completely
arable. She rose, stricken with the need to escape.
nd then, before she could get out of the room, there came
g at the front door: a ring that sent a sudden mask of
ulness slipping over the twisted misery of Diana Hill's
veiling even the eyes and the tiny treacherous nerves at
corners of the mouth. It had the facility of the thing that
become a habit. This affair with Jan may not have been
k: but it had carried deception in its train. It had made
asty.

it there in the hall a murmur of words . . . indistinct,
with a hideous clarity. To Guen it was as if the girl who
opened the door was purposely delaying, as though giving
mistress time to gather her forces, to realise whom it was
vas letting in. But it was as if the man said no more and
ss than this: "Don't talk to me. You're a woman and
en hold together." She wondered if it was going on for

ever. She sat there staring at the door, expecting it to open. Her marvellous calm had gone to pieces: she wanted to shriek, and all the time she was wondering, with some detached corner of her brain, what fool first thought of putting brass fittings on a white-painted door.

In that brief fraction of time the details of Diana Hill's pink drawing-room stamped themselves for ever upon the tablets of Guen's mind. Months after she saw them as clearly as she saw them then. The hideous modern furniture, the polished fender of brass, the pink tiles, the white muslin curtains, draped back and fluted at the edges, the small square garden beyond, the neat patterned wall-paper hung with pictures that didn't matter; the fern in its brass stand (how fond people were of something to polish!), the bowl of narcissi in the window, smelling, as Alice would have said, as if you were going to your own funeral—and, in the midst, Diana Hill's face, white and a little disgusting, because though she had readjusted the mask she did not seem able to prevent her fright from peeping out at the eyes and mouth.

Then the door opened and a thick-set man in khaki came into the room. Self-possession descended upon Guen as a mantle. She flashed Diana Hill a look which though it said, "Introduce me, please!" said a good deal more than that. It said, "Oh, play up! For heaven's sake play up!"

Mrs. Hill "played up." She "played up" desperately, the cracks in the mask no longer visible.

"Hallo, K.B.," she said. Her tone was so marvellously indifferent you knew she had done this sort of thing before. "This is Miss Brown. She called to return my purse."

"That's very kind of you, Miss . . . Brown." "K.B." held out his hand, but his voice was hostile, thick with suspicion of her, his wife and the universe. "But I didn't know it was her *purse* my wife had lost."

You saw her true colour then. It came up, red, like a rose, over cheek and neck, tearing its way through the white mask that impeded it.

"Oh, the ring," she said. "I found that behind the bath this morning. I must really be more careful."

K.B. looked at her.

"You must," he said quietly.

She flinched at that, as though the lash in the quiet words

got home. The slash it made in the mask of carefulness showed livid, and from it deadly fear reached out and stabbed Guen's precarious calm to the heart. Once again she had a furious longing to escape, to get away from this man's quiet eyes and hostile voice. How much did he suspect? How much did he *know*? She felt that once she got outside she would run.

"Let me see you out, Miss Brown."

He held the door open, his eyes upon her face, so that she did not dare look round. She walked past him into the hall, racking her brain to think of something that should detain him at the door long enough to give the woman in there in the drawing-room time to pull herself together. But she could think of nothing at all, save that his lawn was in excellent condition and the winter jasmine in bloom—which he could quite well see for himself. He wasn't grateful for what she said, and interested neither in it nor in her. As he stood there holding open the door for her his whole manner and bearing said, as his voice in the hall had done, "You're a woman . . . and women hold together. And I wish you'd take yourself off."

She did. She walked down to the gate, which she carefully latched; smiled, and saw the door of "The Elms" shut to. A few steps and she was out of sight and out of hearing. She could run if she liked.

But she didn't run. She walked out into the high-road (where there were placards announcing a Labour victory for West Leyton) and climbed on to a bus. She was cold and her hands were trembling so that she could scarcely find the coppers for her fare. Horror and disgust swept over her in waves; she felt physically unclean—as if she would never get rid of the atmosphere of that unspeakable household, where deceit lurked and suspicion and intrigue. How much did that man know? Nothing. He couldn't possibly *know*, and what he suspected didn't matter. He had no proof. They were safe—her mother, her father; and Jan—in his grave. There would be no scandal. Her unbearable afternoon had justified itself. But she was so tired she could have cried, and she hated herself because she minded so much that this should have happened to her.

At home, her mother sat by the fire in an unlighted room. She had evidently been sewing, for as Guen moved across the

room she stumbled over a reel of cotton and sent it rolling noisily on to the polished floor that skirted the carpet. But Anne Suffield was not sewing now; her hands, idle and folded, rested in her lap. Guen slipped down at her feet, and put her head on her mother's knee.

"I'm so tired!" she said. She was more than tired: she was faint with nausea and disgust: her nerves felt frayed. She wanted to shriek.

Anne Suffield said nothing. Her idle hands did not move; just remained there, cool, like flowers, beneath Guen's hot cheeks and lips, and suddenly a spasm of anger ran through her because her mother did not care for her—or for Allan or for Pen or for anyone—as she had cared for Jan. Guen turned in her modernity and rebelled. It wasn't fair: parents ought to love their children equally; it wasn't right that her mother should have loved Jan best—that she should still love him best. But she always would: you couldn't alter or change her. She'd love him that way even if she knew—what Guen and Allan knew. But she never would. It was on that thought Guen's anger trickled out—like sand through an hour-glass—and was spent. She was only infinitely tired and weary, and her head ached unbearably. Long sobs shook her body; tears flowed thickly upon the cool hands folded like flowers beneath her face. They moved, hovered for a second about her rough head and over her ears, and were still.

"Ssh . . . s . . . sh," said Anne Suffield, as though she were soothing a child. "S . . . sh . . . s . . . sh . . ." and presently, "Why do you cry?"

Guen raised her head and stared at the fire. She wanted to say: "Because I'm tired and because my head aches and because you sit here in the dark and forget us all." But she said nothing, only got up and sat in a chair, staring down into the fire until presently her father came in from the city. She rose then and escaped. When Allan came in she encountered him in the hall.

"Come up to my room," she said, "I want to speak to you."

He gave her one quick look and put down his stick and got out of his coat.

"It's all right," she said. "Horrible—but all right. . . . We can't talk about it here."

They went upstairs.

dinner that night Allan exerted himself to talk to his They had saved her from a painful piece of age, he and Guen between them: what they had to do all of them—was to make things up to her; to be, n them, so bright and entertaining that she didn't notice p quite so much. She was very brave; when her eye his she smiled: she was attentive, saw that your plate plenished. But she was very pale and her eyes appeared e slipped farther back into her head. Her face, like a flower, had shut up. Her dark, soft hair still showed y a thread of grey; but in some strange subtle fashion oked older. Allan understood what Guen had known ight at St. Julian's—that the last remnant of Anne d's youth had died with Jan. She had carried it about er so long it was strange, as yet, to see her without it. ouldn't believe that in one short week she had become ely middle-aged.

n, as he looked at her, felt queerly old and protective. ed to him that his love for his mother had suffered some nd rare change, so that now, for the first time, it demanded ing of him—effort or thought or vigilance. It no longer cepted. Instead of absorbing, it gave out, strove and d and divined. He had a sense he had never experienced of being of use. The knowledge, strangely, was like a wind blowing through his soul, bracing him to effort rpose.

too, did Caryl's swift smile across the table. It was to as though she answered his thought, as though, too, she ystallised her grief and was able to see down through its to the heart of life. Allan, smiling back, saw that brief g and widening of Caryl's red mouth as a thing beautiful ave, and memorable as the glimpse of a bird flying low n the dark and the light.

Caryl was not smiling when, after dinner, she took Allan side and asked him what was wrong with Guen. Allan e thought she had had a rather unpleasant afternoon. *pleasant!*" said Caryl. "She looks as though she's seen ing nasty—a street accident or something like that—and king her violently sick inside."

Anne Suffield coming in just then said Guen had gone upstairs to work.

"Oh, Lord!" said Caryl, as though she thought something ought to be done about it. "I thought the new book was to be pleasant?"

"Why shouldn't it be?"

"Oh, no reason," said Caryl. But the look she gave Allan said quite plainly that she didn't believe you could write anything pleasant while you felt violently sick somewhere inside. When life made you retch it wasn't a pen you wanted in your hand. That, Caryl thought, was where the writers of to-day made their mistake. They would write about life just when life was making them sick, and as if that weren't enough they called the result Realism. Literature was a thoroughly depressing subject—an unending procession of Shropshire Lads and Judes the Obscure and Widows in Bye-Streets—just as though nothing pleasant had ever happened to anybody at all, as though war and death and misery were all that life had to offer you. And it wasn't, it wasn't. . . . Even with her mother's face, shut like a flower, before her and with Leader's mournful, questioning eyes, she knew it wasn't. Life was something far more than the mere things which happen to you. Its springs went deep down, its meaning—and Caryl did not doubt it had a meaning—must be sought inside yourself. She had an awkward wayward genius for seeing life as a boon whatever it did to you: but even Caryl knew that there were times when she ought to have the decency to forget it. Yet even to-night, over some trigonometry problem that was eluding solution, the old thought was running through her brain. "I don't want to miss anything that's coming to me. I'll never be sorry whatever it is!" Once she had said something like that to Jan, and Jan had laughed. "Oh, you!" he said. "Good Lord, yes. *You'd* think it a privilege to break a front tooth."

The recollection, somehow, and the wound that it made, drew her nearer to life. Her heart melted in passionate pity because death, like a gigantic broom, had swept Jan out of the house of life, so that nothing that happened in it mattered to him any longer. He was dead and missing everything; the fierce, exquisite things of joy and pain, the look of the cool, dark night, the ecstasy of the new days that were moving out




INTRUSION

77

in long procession over the hill of the future. Nothing ever again would happen to Jan. He had passed on out of reach, and life, moved neither to pity nor regret, swung by, implacable.

And Caryl—fighting down the sobs that climbed up in her throat—sat there and watched it.



CHAPTER EIGHT

1

THEY had silenced Mrs. Hill: but they had not silenced Roberta. Her letters went on. Not that Guen realised whom they were from. She had left the perusal of Jan's correspondence to Allan, and he did not tell her. Always he read Roberta's letters and tore them up; always he threw at Guen the same formula: "Nothing important." Yet something about the handwriting struck her as familiar.

And then she found out why. Hunting for brown paper, she came across the piece Roberta had used when returning Guen's clothes: "Miss Suffield, Mount Calm, Teddington." Roberta's handwriting. There it was—the same ugly capitals, the same indecision about the "e" and the "i" in Suffield. She wondered why Allan should have made such a secret of it. Why shouldn't he have told her that Jan had kept—that—up? Jan wouldn't forget a face as pretty as Roberta's. Besides, what did it matter—now—how much or how little he had "kept it up"? It never occurred to her that Allan, too, had "kept it up" (even as little as he had); but, for all that, she found herself worrying at intervals during the day how the subject might be broached that evening when Allan came home to dinner or whether it were best not broached at all.

But Allan did not come home that evening to dinner. He wired that business detained him. The "business," as it happened, took him to Highgate—found him knocking, with a beating heart, at Number two-hundred-and-two Manningtree Avenue.

2


He had fought all day against his sudden decision to see Roberta. Why shouldn't he write? The only thing that mattered was that her notes to Jan should cease—that she should

know that Jan's need for her letters, if it had ever existed at all, existed no longer.

But was that all? Allan knew that, somehow, it wasn't, that he wanted to see her again; wanted to see how she took this news of Jan's death. Something brutal and savage within him urged him to confront her with it. He wanted to know just how much there had been between Roberta and Jan, and had an idea that just by seeing how she took it he would know—all there was to know. And he had to know—whether Jan had been her lover or not!

It was extraordinary that he should care like that. He told himself that but for the arrival of her notes to Jan (Jan who was dead and cold in his grave) he would have "got over it"—whatever "it" was. He would certainly not have called it "love." But she had for him some sort of deep physical attraction that had been disturbing, partly because he had never experienced it before and partly because, apart from her youth and vigour and sheer animal spirits, she bored him to death. But the things that attracted him were irresistible: he could not imagine Roberta tired or worried or ill. She did not belong to the tiny minority who hurl themselves against life as against a brick wall, and Allan did. Life for her was a stream in which she dabbled her feet, and the very look of her there, strolling lazily, barefoot, was somehow unspeakably delightful. That, perhaps, was the secret of it.

Allan had never known anybody who infected him with that sense of pleasure, of light-heartedness. Certainly Madeleine had never done anything of the sort. Their friendship had always, in a sense, "taken it out of them." They could infect each other with their moods, with their despondencies and despairs. They hated the same things about life and with the same intensity; sought for life's meaning with the same persistency and failed always to find it. They found, indeed, nothing but facts. And from facts you were curiously defenceless. If you couldn't bear them you shut yourself away from them, as Maurice Linton had done. Maurice had been afraid of facts, and facts eventually had killed him. But Roberta never looked at facts more than she could help: certainly she never allowed them to worry her. However it was, Allan was beyond question intrigued by her trick of seeing a brick wall as a summer stream. It was an amiable trick, though other



girls had had it beside Roberta: but unfortunately Roberta was the first girl Allan had ever really looked at. And because he was tired and disheartened he was in the mood to find her and her trick absurdly attractive—on the principle that one admires all the things one has not and is not. The mood did not include a vision of the other moods when the people who persist in regarding a brick wall as a stream are apt to get on your nerves; nor realisation of the fact that Roberta's complete lack of imagination was the real attraction to one who had been born with too much.

There remained the towing-path incident with that boy Ancell—and this friendship with Jan. The Ancell incident, of itself, might well be nothing: but as evidence of character it was damning. The rigid, austere Puritan that was buried beneath the opulence of Allan's temperament rose up in sternest disapproval. But, for all that, there was something that opposed the harsh judgment and the stern Puritan who delivered it, as though it understood that Roberta "picked up" her male acquaintances not because she was wicked, but because she was a fool. The windows of her mind opened to one side only of life: she did not know that the other windows had any view at all. . . .

On the whole, it seemed that the incident of the towing-path and the things it connoted counted with Allan for but little. The things which disturbed him were all mixed up with Jan, and it was they that had sent him knocking at Roberta's door. That much Allan would have acknowledged. What he would not have acknowledged was the longing to see her again. Yet that, really, was what it came down to.

3

The door of two-hundred-and-two was opened presently by a stout woman who wore, with other things, a coloured apron and an air of surprise, as though Allan was not at all the person she had expected to find on her doorstep. She had Roberta's hazel eyes, and beneath the flush of the over-stout woman some hint of Roberta's fine skin was perceptible. But somehow, even here in inaction she gave you the sense that she was in a terrific hurry. To Allan it seemed ridiculous in a person of her bulk.

"Miss Leigh," he said. "Is she at home?"

"Come in," said the woman, and shut the door after Allan with that devastating air of having not a moment to lose. Allan wiped his boots, somewhat unnecessarily, for the streets were white and dry, while the woman went to a descending staircase and called down it:

"Berta! Here's someone to see you."

Her voice was a contradiction of her size. It was querulous and thin, as though begging you to believe that her corpulence was not natural, but an outrageous accident which had overtaken her. Before Allan could recover from the surprise of it its owner precipitated him into the front room and with ridiculous speed produced a light.

"My daughter's been washing her hair, so you mustn't mind if she keeps you waiting a bit. What name is it, sir?"

"Suffield!" said Allan.

Mrs. Leigh had heard the name. Yes, of course, the gentleman from Teddington. Roberta had often talked of him, and she was so grateful to Miss Suffield for lending Roberta a change that wet day—in October, wasn't it?

"Oh . . . don't mention it!" said Allan, who was nervous and inattentive, and only realised that Mrs. Leigh was in a hurry and that he (or his family) was being thanked for something.

"I'll go and hurry her up."

That, you felt, was her mission in life—to hurry people up! On this occasion, at least, Allan thought it was a mission which should be encouraged.

"If you would, please," he said, wanting fervently to get the interview over and be gone.

Mrs. Leigh went out—with the air of one whose motto in life is "No time to be lost and the devil take the hindmost." Even in the midst of his sudden and desperate shyness Allan wanted to laugh: he felt very tired, as if she had robbed him of his own share of energy. He sat there on the edge of a chair and stared about the room, not seeing much, save that it was ugly and that there was no fire in the grate. It seemed ages before Roberta came in.

He awoke to a sense of her standing in the doorway with a loose mane of hair about her face, out of which, as her eyes dwelt upon him, some of the brightness faded.

"Oh . . ." she began. "It's *you* . . ."

He was suddenly appalled by the fact of his own presence there. Afterwards he supposed they must have shaken hands; but he had no recollection of it. His emotions, so far as he could disentangle them, were those of pity and remorse. The savage instinct that had sent him there deserted him, leaving him sadly and unexpectedly open to attack. And he was nervous and didn't know how to begin.

"Well," said Roberta, "and what do I owe the pleasure of this visit to?"

The emotion induced in Allan by the masses of Roberta's wonderful hair got queerly mixed up with the wish that she would learn to put her prepositions in their proper place, but before he could find anything to say she had noticed the black band on his grey overcoat. As she sat there on the sofa he saw the coquettish, seductive air drop from her; the exquisite colour creep back from her clear skin. In that instant she was blanched to the lips: nothing of the brilliant colour that had flamed up at him was left save the red-gold of her hair—and that, somehow, intensified the etiolation of the rest. After all, it wasn't going to be necessary to say anything. Roberta understood. He stood there wondering why it was he had been so certain he would read what he wanted to know in her face. It said so much, that blanched, pathetic countenance, or so little, and whatever it was he couldn't read it. Any girl would have looked like that if you had told her brutally that a man she had gone about with had been dead and buried for a fortnight. It was the look of youth that, scarcely knowing that death existed, had been suddenly confronted with its handiwork. And because the look hurt him atrociously Allan hastened to soften the blow. But his words seemed peculiarly meaningless: he made an effort to galvanize them into significance. "You knew," he said, "that he always had a weak heart?"

Roberta said, miserably, that she did. She, too, seemed to plunge after the meaning of words. "He used to laugh about it," she said, then suddenly she broke down and cried, her face buried in the muslin cushions of the sofa. There was something in her crying which both hurt and angered Allan; and, more than that, he was afraid that downstairs they would hear and come in to see what was wrong. To-night he couldn't bear a scene. If anyone came in he would turn and rush out of the

house. He sat down on the sofa and wondered if Guen's visit to Parson's Green had been like this. He was unspeakably wretched. After an interval he leaned forward and touched Roberta's shoulder.

"Don't cry," he said, "please, don't cry!" He hadn't imagined, somehow, that she could. It was unbearable, but it went on. His anger choked down the hurt of it.

"Stop crying like that!" he commanded her. "Stop it at once! Do you want the whole household to come in?"

To his surprise she did stop and sat up limply from the cushions.

"I don't care," she said. "I don't care about anything!"

"*Why* don't you care about anything?"

She looked sulky and her mouth trembled. Her hand rested upon the back of the sofa, and Allan put his upon it. He sat quite still, watching her, seeing the stormy heaving of her little firm breast and the trembling of the red, dimpled mouth. To Allan breathing had become an almost painful affair.

"Why don't you care about anything?" he repeated. His voice was purposely dull and toneless.

She pulled her hand free.

"What's the use? The people you like always die or go away or like other people better than you . . . or something."

"You . . . were fond of my brother?"

She nodded.

"*Very* fond?"

Again the nod.

"*How* fond?"

"What d'you mean, *how* fond?"

"Just that."

"I suppose you mean would I have married him if he'd asked me?"

"He wouldn't have asked you. Jan was not the 'marrying' sort. Hadn't you discovered that?"

"P'raps I had. I can look after myself, thank you."

"Can you?"

"Of course I can. . . . I'm not *that* sort, anyhow."

"Which sort?"

"Oh, don't think I don't know what you meant. The Mrs. Hill sort. . . ."

"Then you know about Mrs. Hill?"

"Of course I know. . . . And about the others, too. . . ." She looked sulky again: her fingers plucked at the crumpled muslin cushions.

"And you didn't mind?"

"What was the good of minding? He *was* that sort . . . only it doesn't matter if you're a man. Everybody liked him . . . and he liked everybody, pretty nearly. I wanted him to like me best. He didn't. He said I had old-fashioned ideas. . . . He used to call me a Puritan. . . . But he was good to me, though."

"How 'good'?"

"He took me about . . . to theatres and dances. He was awfully generous with his money. . . ."

"Go on."

She drew herself up, sharply and suddenly on the defensive.

"I shan't," she said. "What's it got to do with you?"

"Nothing. But I mean to know."

"I suppose you think you're very clever?" she said, looking not at him, but at her fingers, which fidgeted with the lace edge of the muslin cushions.

"Not very," he said. His hand came down again on hers.

"What else? Theatres and dances . . . and kisses?"

"I never said so."

"They go together."

"What if they do?"

"Theatres and dances and kisses. Was that all?"

He saw the colour come up just beneath her ear, spread over her neck and up into her cheek. "I hate you!" she hissed at him, and suddenly he laughed on a queer high note of relief. His hand left her hand, slid up the arm and turned her round by her shoulder. Some new queer sensation was awake in him, overpoweringly alert. His whole being stood poised upon the edge of some new emotion. It seemed as if he must topple over the edge and be swamped.

"Do you?" he said, his mouth very near to Roberta's.

He felt her go limp in his arms. The effect upon him was like a douche of cold water.

"All right!" he said, pushing her away. "I'm not going to kiss you."

She fell back, looking limp and stupid, on the crumpled

muslin cushions. He hated her. And he no longer wanted to kiss her. That lax yielding of her body to his arms had killed the desire in him. He got up and picked up his hat and stick, despising her. She was a fool: she cared only about men and their flattery—any man who wasn't a freak. He felt that never so long as he lived could he bear to see her again.

"Good-bye," he said, and walked away to the door. But he did not open it, for Roberta, instead of speaking, fell suddenly to crying again. He saw the tears falling between her fingers and the red mark his hands had made on her wrist. He couldn't bear it. Putting down his stick and hat, he came nearer. "Oh, don't," he said, "I'm so sorry!"

She looked up after a while, dabbing at her eyes.

"You . . . were horrid," she said.

"I know. . . . But I couldn't help it. I imagined . . . beastly things. . . . I *had* to know."

"Why?" she asked.

"I can't tell you. . . . Don't think about it any more."

"I'm so miserable," she said.

He came and sat down at her side.

"Don't be miserable any more. . . ." He took her hands and held them. "Don't you think you could forgive me and let us be friends?"

She nodded. He wasn't Jan, but—he was alive. And Jan was dead. She would never see him again. The thought bit through the thinness of her soul and filled her with profound self-pity, so that her tears almost came back. But not quite—for it was unwise to make your eyes really red, however miserable you were. So she went on dabbing at her eyes and appeared to be considering Allan's proposal of friendship.

"All right," she said presently and quite casually. But then she *felt* casual about him. The only person, if it came to that, about whom she *hadn't* felt casual was dead. Nothing mattered.

The look she gave Allan was sombre and a little uncertain, for she was afraid she had made her eyes red, after all. They ached, and so did her head. She felt a sight and wished Allan would go.

And soon he did. It came to him suddenly that he must go at once, and his farewell was made with some of the precipitancy with which Mrs. Leigh had shown him in, and complicated by that lady's unexpected appearance in the doorway

with cocoa on a tray and an invitation to partake of it on her lips. His gesture seemed to be refusing it and Roberta and the ugly little household altogether. He must get away. He murmured something about a train and found himself a moment or so later in the street, where the moonlight chequered the dingy houses into queer new shapes of black and white. His heart beat rapidly, his face and hands were hot. Thoughts raced after him: he was tremendously excited, uplifted. . . .

He burrowed presently and went down to the tube. On the platform was a Hilmer Roydon advertisement, and Allan found himself looking at it with fresh interest. Even here, denuded of its colouring, the face was exquisite. More than that, it did, somehow, suggest that there was something—a good deal—behind it. It didn't *look* just a mask. Perhaps it wasn't. Perhaps it was only that Roberta had never had a chance. He didn't quite know what he meant by the phrase, but it exonerated Roberta for her lack of brains and, in a way, explained himself to himself, which certainly did seem to be necessary. Also it definitely took her out of the rather vague crowd of Allan's acquaintances and put her into that tiny group in which was his mother, Pen and Caryl, who had, in one respect at least, to be "protected." Roberta, too, wanted protecting—from herself and her lack of "chance," and her surroundings and her curious assumption that the only things that mattered in life were her own pretty face and the having of a "good time." Allan did not know that he was putting it as definitely as all that: but he certainly was. He, who wanted passionately to remould the world, wanted also—if, at this stage, less passionately—to remould Roberta, so that the things she did and said no longer contradicted her face, or her face, perhaps, no longer contradicted the things she said and did. Neither was it likely that his failure with the world would in any way deter him from attempting the reformation of Roberta, though Guen could have told him that the task was, if anything, more difficult. But there at the beginning, when she might have hoped to convince him, she did not even know he was thinking of attempting it.

Neither did Allan. Down there in the tube he sat opposite a row of faces which succeeded presently in blotting out the much more pleasing one of Roberta's. In so far as the faces were features Allan might, perhaps, have said they were dif-

ent: but in so far as he saw them as faces (mere expressions) saw them all as exactly similar. For they wore that curiously blank stare of complacency that tube-travelling seems to engender. They looked out, every one of those faces, on a dull world to which they were used and in which nothing ever really happened. Allan wanted to laugh because all these people were half dead without knowing it. It was so funny, that night. . . .

Before he reached home, however, his excitement had died away. Nothing whatever would have moved him to laughter. A sense of frustration and loneliness was upon him. Beneath the moon, that still cut up the houses into fantastic shapes, his face was white and tired—very like the faces he had wanted to laugh at in the tube.

CHAPTER NINE

1

WHAT followed for Allan was like nothing at all. He was torn, all the time, between conflicting emotions. He did ridiculous things, was saved, miraculously, from doing others much more ridiculous. He wandered up to Hilmer Roydon's studio, hung about outside because he hadn't sufficient courage to go in, wondered, at seven o'clock, if he had missed Roberta, and went home. The thought of her was a torture that kept him from work and sapped his energy. A distorted and unreal week went by, and then one day he rang up the studio, enquired for Miss Leigh and learned that she had been away three days with influenza. A sort of panic seized upon Allan as he listened; he asked for particulars in a peremptory fashion, in a queer, excited voice he found it difficult to control. At six o'clock, when he left the City, he went over to Highgate, stopping *en route* to buy a bunch of spring flowers that looked out at him from a florist's window. The tube was crowded, and he wondered why the flowers made him feel such a fool and why people looked at him as though it was an unheard of thing for a young man to be seen abroad with such a bouquet.

He was not allowed to see Roberta, who was still in bed and the proud possessor of a temperature; but Mrs. Leigh relieved him of his flowers with a gesture that had all the force of a snatch without its rudeness, and promised to deliver any message. Allan found it difficult to reduce his emotion to words. What was it he wanted to say to Roberta, save that he couldn't keep away from her and that he'd been panic-stricken when he heard of her illness over the phone? Obviously this was not the sort of thing to retail to Roberta—certainly not through the medium of her mother. He said something banal and idiotic, and withdrew.

Two days later, on the Saturday, he called again. It was a

on day after a heavy fall of snow in the early morning. She was up and lying on the sofa in the dingy little room of number two-hundred-and-two. She did not look ill—a little paler, perhaps, and with an invalid's trick of half-closed eyes and soft tones. It seemed to her that he stood for an hour in the doorway, looking at her, smiling, feeling as if something had happened to the colour of his face and to his legs. Neither would respond to anything.

He found himself presently inside the room, shaking hands with her in a friendly fashion and hoping she was better. He never remembered much that they said: he had an idea that they said very little, but gradually his shyness left him. He looked about the room and saw that they had dumped his flowers ungracefully in an basket on a small table in the window, and that the pictures on the wall, the looking-glass had evidently been hung by a very tall man with a slightly crooked eye. Later Roberta's mother came to drink tea. With a velocity that took your breath away she brought in the hideous vase containing Allan's bouquet on to the table, hurled the table into the middle of the room and proceeded to dispose her cups and saucers with all the noise and confusion of a tornado. Allan found her energy exhausting. Why couldn't anybody lay tea with an air of expecting the last trumpet? Why couldn't she get it finished?

When the meal was over the door opened and the man who had evidently hung the pictures came into the room. "My mother," said Roberta, and Allan wondered how it was she had been brought up being like either of her parents, but was glad that she was not like Mr. Leigh. Mr. Leigh was tall and spare, with a kindly, tired face and slow movements, as though his wife had annexed his independence and made it her own. That was how Allan thought of

the woman who went about snatching at other people's independence as some others snatch at stray cats and umbrellas and handbags. Roberta and her father (and Allan himself, though not aware of it) had an air of warding her off. It was

So, in a way, was the air of relief with which, when the day had gone out, Mr. Leigh stood by the fire and talked of his trouble with the miners and railway men, and the high fares of the bus and tram fares and wondered what we were to do. Also, he grumbled at the Government and at the March, which, Allan gathered, were phenomena quite

beyond him. Later, Mrs. Leigh bustled in again and decapitated an interesting conversation about the proposed tax on bachelors. The head of the talk rolled down among the group of three and broke it up. Mr. Leigh drifted out of the room and Allan announced that he must be going.

Roberta was not returning to work until the Wednesday, and Allan promised to come in on the Tuesday evening if Mrs. Leigh would allow him. Mrs. Leigh would.

"Oh, come whenever you like, young man," she said. "I'll be much obliged to you. You'd be doing me a real kindness if you could keep Roberta at home a bit. I never saw such a girl for gadding about. I might as well never have had a daughter for all I see of her. And it isn't as if she isn't allowed to bring her friends home."

She hustled Allan out of the house as though he were a dispatch rider on some forlorn hope, and came back to collect her piled-up tray.

But not alone for that, as Roberta saw at a glance. Her mother had something to say and was not going to be prevented from saying it. She began. Her approval of Allan was unqualified, like the terms which she employed to express it. And as unending, Roberta thought. She looked bored. It was an expression she had practised very carefully before the glass, and singularly successful with everyone save her mother. Also, it was one of Hilmer Roydon's favourite photographic effects.

"Oh, mother, do be quiet. He's all right, but he's not a patch on his brother."

Mrs. Leigh stood there holding the loaded tray in her hands and looking down at her daughter.

"Well, and if he isn't! His brother's dead—and he'd never have married you, from what I can make out of it, neither. And you'll never be happy until you've got a man of your own."

"But I *don't* want to get married . . . not yet, anyway. (Do put that tray down, for goodness' sake!) I think marriage is rotten. A girl's finished, when she's married."

"*Is* she? Well, and a good job, my lady, when *you're* 'finished,' as you call it. . . . I tell you, I shan't have any peace of mind till you're safely married and off my hands."

Roberta deepened the expression of boredom on her face and called up another, less successful, to keep it company.

"I think you're thoroughly disgusting!" she said.

"It doesn't matter a scrap what you think or what you don't think, Roberta. Once is enough of that sort of thing in a family, thank you."

"Oh, do come off it, mother. It's time you forgot that old affair. I'm not Delia's sort. Besides, I'm tired of having her pushed down my throat."

"Delia" had been Delia King and Roberta's cousin. Two years ago she had had an illegitimate child and had died of it. That, probably, was the most considerate thing Delia ever did for her family. But her aunt—Roberta's mother—was ungrateful even for that, for Roberta and Delia had been too intimate for her peace of mind. If it were not such a very wise mother that knows her own child Mrs. Leigh might have known Roberta; might have understood that, although Roberta shared the extraordinary prettiness of her cousin and her equally extraordinary lack of brains, she shared neither her warmth nor her generosity of nature. It was these things which had proved Delia's undoing, and from them Roberta never stood in the very least danger. Nothing whatever swept Roberta off her feet. She remained always cold and detached; her feet firmly planted on the right side of conventional morality, from whence she had looked across at Delia, voting her a little fool and the thing she had done nasty rather than wicked. Roberta had known many men, but had never gone down into the jungle of their desires. She did not live, as Delia had done, on the slippery slopes of love. Love, indeed, was not a thing she really cared about—or understood. She was cold all through, but she was vain. She wanted admiration and amusement and excitement, and she had no other means of procuring them than through her own delightful appearance. Marriage was another matter—and more difficult to achieve. It had, too, certain obvious disadvantages which disturbed her when she thought of them, so that her Prince Charming tended to become a rather incorporeal figure, whose hand was constantly in the pocket of the trousers he had scarcely sufficient body to need.

But Roberta's mother was not "wise" and she did not know these things about her own daughter. She "knew," actually, nothing whatever of Roberta, save that she ought to be married. She had a vague idea that it would take a husband to keep Roberta in order—"a husband and babies" was how the

phrase formed itself in her mind, though whether or not Roberta would keep the babies in order was another matter. From the brilliant marriage that had included a motor-car and a houseful of servants and furniture, Mrs. Leigh had come to desire for Roberta any marriage at all. And she despaired because even that didn't seem too easy, since Roberta would not look at the young men who would have married her, and the young men she would look at did not mean marriage. Money married money, position gravitated towards position—that much was mere platitude, and Roberta had neither money nor position. She was the daughter of a London warehouseman and earned two pounds a week at Hilmer Roydon's studio—of which Mrs. Leigh strongly disapproved, firstly because Roberta had gone there to make appointments and write out receipts and had remained to be photographed, and Mrs. Leigh thought it couldn't be good for Roberta to be photographed so frequently and in such ridiculous positions, and found it disturbing to find Roberta's face staring out at her from the tube lifts and platforms whenever she was minded to travel. And secondly, she disapproved of the studio because it was there Roberta had met Tommy Carew, who had eventually left to go "on the pictures." Not that Mrs. Leigh believed that, for she had met Miss Carew—had had the privilege of entertaining her to tea one day and of calling her "common" the next. But it wasn't her "commonness" to which Mrs. Leigh objected mainly, but her good looks, which she considered too emphatic, and because she had come to the point when distrust of "good looks"—male or female—was an overpowering instinct.

But whilst Allan's lack of title to the distinction of good looks ingratiated him first with Roberta's mother, the fact that he was the first of "Roberta's young men" to come to the house certainly reinforced it. That he had done so staggered even Roberta, who usually said of the young man she affected that of course she "couldn't bring them to the house," and perhaps her mother knew that was only Roberta's way of saying, "they wouldn't come if I asked them." Roberta, no doubt about it, was too big for her shoes. She threw a wide net—and caught nothing. And sometimes, with Delia and her story in mind, Mrs. Leigh ran amok and Delia was made into a cat-o'-nine-tails with which Roberta was mercilessly afflicted.

And always this sort of scene ensued. Always it ended with Roberta in tears and a strained, uncomfortable atmosphere for several days.

Roberta wept now. But her mother was adamant.

"Now you can just stop that, Roberta, and find something to do. You've sat there polishing your nails and being sorry for yourself and goodness knows what for the last three days. There's a pile of stockings in the kitchen to be mended and they'll give you something to occupy your mind."

She went out after them like a whirlwind, and Roberta sobbed on into her cushions. She wasn't really sure what she was crying about. Perhaps because her mother had "pushed Delia down her throat" again, and because influenza, even a mild attack, makes one depressed; but most of all, perhaps, because she hadn't yet got used to the fact that Jan was dead, and in her shallow way, and as much as she had ever cared for anybody, she had cared for Jan. Besides, Roberta was a sentimentalist: it was the nearest she ever got to real feeling.

It was probably true, as her mother had said, that Jan would never have married her: but at twenty-one that had not really bothered her. Some day or other she supposed she would have to get married, but she meant none the less to resist her mother's idea of marriage, which seemed to mean the keeping of some man's house, the cooking of his dinner and the mending of his socks. None of these things appealed to Roberta. There were a good many things that didn't appeal to Roberta. Marriage (as delineated by Miss Carew) was one of them, which, however, she was prepared to endure for the sake of the other things which went with it—the assured income she was not inconvenienced to earn, and the comfortable home in which the work was not done by her, but in which she moved leisurely in pretty frocks. Seen thus, marriage was a quite bearable institution, scarcely disturbed by the return at seven o'clock of that incorporeal Somebody (with a bunch of violets or a box of chocolates) who kissed her and said how charming she looked. He never omitted that. Roberta liked men to have nice manners, even if she liked them to have no bodies—to speak of!

It didn't—Roberta's view of marriage—run to babies.

That was where Mrs. Leigh might have saved herself a good deal of worry. It was quite true, though her mother

never knew it, that Roberta wasn't "Delia's sort." She was a voluptuary—she loved bodily ease and comfort and pretty clothes and good food—but sexually she was cold. Far from regarding sex as a joke, as Tommy Carew did, or as a means of expression as Delia had done, she regarded it as one of the trials of existence, a thing she could very well do without. "I think all that's horrid," was her attitude, and for it she took a great measure of personal pride, as though it were somehow a tremendous virtue. Roberta saw herself as a delicate creature in an indelicate world, and was occasionally sorry for herself. She hated her mother, as she had hated Allan, for suggesting that she had the ordinary passions of humanity and was (or had been) in any danger of submitting to them.

In its own way, of course, it was funny, though Roberta was in no immediate danger of perceiving it.

Meanwhile she mended her stockings and Allan rode home on the top of a bus and watched the coming of the dark. The moonlight crept up over the houses and the muffled wings of night beat softly about him. And as he looked down over the edge of night, for the first time for a week the thought of Roberta slipped out of his mind.

2

Tuesday was much like the Saturday, save that the people upstairs were frying fish for their evening meal, which was scarcely an improvement. The dingy sitting-room was a little less dingy, perhaps, because at the window fresh curtains had appeared over which trailed a pattern of queerly-shaped leaves and flowers and things that looked like beetles. His flowers were still on the table—looking (and probably smelling by now) as hideous as the vase in which they stood. For the rest, Roberta reclined as gracefully as ever on the couch before the fire and Mrs. Leigh dashed in and out of the room like a tornado. And once Mr. Leigh came in and talked about the first issue of the *Daily Herald*, and the marriage of Elizabeth Asquith, and the collapse of a warehouse at Liverpool—all of which things, it seemed, happened on the previous day. It dawned presently on Allan that Roberta's parents were bent on not leaving them alone together for any appreciable length of time. The conviction somehow disgusted Allan, and his disgust

recoiled upon Roberta. It was as though even her parents knew she was not to be trusted with men. He left early in an abrupt fashion, feeling, once more, that he never wanted to see her again.

After the Tuesday he wore himself out in the effort to keep away from her, and, though he haunted the door of Hilmer Roydon's studio, he haunted it against his will—his feet drew him towards it irresistibly, so that his will went for nothing. But at least he gave up his visits to Manningtree Avenue. He could not stand the atmosphere of that terrible little sitting-room, where, beneath the watchful eye of Roberta's parents, he felt he might at any moment, be asked to "declare" himself. Neither did Roberta show any anxiety to have him there, caring no more for the parental eye than Allan, to whom, somehow, it never once occurred to take Roberta to Teddington. Besides, if it had, Teddington and Highgate were so far apart.

Presently, however, that excuse existed no longer, for the Canadian family suddenly decided to go home by the next boat and the Suffields moved back again to Highgate.

3

Alan was distressed, when he came to think of it, that during this period he had forgotten all those things which had happened in February. He had forgotten his brother (save when he remembered him, disastrously, among his thoughts of Roberta); he had forgotten his mother and his intention of "making things up" to her. Yet when he had time to remember, it seemed to him that his mother no longer needed to have things "made up" to her. Almost, indeed, she made his solicitude ridiculous. There was something about her that baffled him, but when he forgot that he was strangely affected by the dignity and quiet with which she had taken up again the threads of life, had gone on weaving life's pattern. Weaving in quieter colours, perhaps, but with hope and high courage. You simply couldn't be sorry for her any longer; but Allan and Guen were glad they had saved her from the knowledge they had buried within themselves.

But other people besides Allan were occupied just now with their own affairs. There was Pen with her month-old baby

(they had called him Arthur Jannison): and Caryl, now that the fine weather was coming in, was week-ending again with the Hestons at Wokingham. Guen was in bondage to her new book that had arrived at the stage when it seemed just a string of nouns, verbs and conjunctions, signifying nothing. This occurred every time she wrote anything, and while the fit lasted she was irritable and given to long silences—and longer walks.

It was the time for walks. The sweet young months were climbing up the wall of the year. Young April, green and gold and very lovely, looked with her bright face over the wall, younger May at her heels. The country shone with delicate tints, like a pastel drawing. Laughing, the spring winds ran over it and the scent of the spring flowers. On the Heath the birds sang; there were buds on the hawthorn and beech trees, and violets hidden in the woods. And on Jan's grave the wallflowers were in bloom. . . .

But though Allan's home now lay within twenty minutes' walk of Roberta's, he did not go again to Manningtree Avenue; neither did he propose that Roberta should come to Adelaide Lodge. To ask her there would be to do that for which he felt he could no longer go to Manningtree Avenue; it would be, in effect, a declaration of his position. He would be virtually engaged to Roberta, or at least that was how it seemed to him. He couldn't ask her to come home with him and never ask her to be engaged to him. Yet an engagement, though it might be a long road, had marriage at the end of it, and he did not want to marry Roberta—neither was he able to keep away from her. The position seemed to him to be supremely idiotic. It was, but he would have felt better about it if he had known that most young men had found themselves in similarly idiotic positions not once, but many times before they had arrived at Allan's age. Yet he remained clear-sighted enough about Roberta. He was still a little contemptuous of her, seeing her after these weeks of acquaintanceship as he had done at the first, as the girl who had never heard of Emily Brontë. She was ignorant, vain and egotistic. She couldn't think, and there were times when she bored him profoundly. There was very little about her that his intellect approved of, and his intellect was annoyed with that other part of him which, no doubt at all about it, approved of a good deal, of all the things which formed a part of the overwhelming

effect of youth and vitality which she had upon even the most casual of beholders.

It was to these things Allan was led captive, dodging thought as best he might, but in no mood whatsoever to dodge Roberta. Throughout April he took to haunting the studio door again, and each time he made an appointment for some evening to come. Generally Roberta kept him waiting, and sometimes it was worth it and sometimes it was not. They rode on buses to Richmond and Kew and sat in the park or by the river: or they strolled over the Heath or went down to Epping; and sometimes they went to a theatre or out to dinner, which Roberta liked better, because she was not over-fond of walking. She wouldn't be: she wore the wrong kind of shoes.

Here in the early spring all Allan's spare time was given to Roberta. Books, for the first time in his life, were relatively unimportant. By the middle of April he had spent a good deal of money, but he had not kissed Roberta. Roberta (giving him no credit at all for self-control) voted him dull and disappointing, and began to make excuses when he asked her to go out. She developed an abrupt and surprising conscience over what she called her "neglect" of Tommy Carew, at whose flat she seemed to be meeting with disturbing regularity a young man to whom she referred as "Duggie," but whose name appeared, upon enquiry, to be Douglas Rayne. Mr. Rayne, it further appeared, was on the brink of deserting the tobacco business for the cinema—hence, probably, his friendship with Tommy Carew, or, much more probably, hers with him. Presently, when a demon of jealousy sprang up in Allan, Roberta showed it small mercy. At the times of its worst manifestations she would beg him in that mincing voice which got so dreadfully on Allan's nerves, to remember that there were other men in the world—a phenomenon of which Allan was only too acutely and uncomfortably aware. Also (and no more comfortably) he was aware that if he didn't know his own mind in regard to Roberta there were probably other men who did, and it was absurd to blame Roberta for knowing it, too. But whilst she removed herself from him he suffered. He suffered horribly.

Presently, however, she began to go out with him again, and Tommy Carew slipped a little into the background. "Duggie," so Allan gathered, was going over to America. When he men-

tioned him one day to Roberta she became evasive and shrugged her shoulders as if she shrugged Mr. Rayne not only out of England, but off the map altogether. Mr. Rayne, it seemed only reasonable to suppose, had not come up to scratch. Anyway, the friendship between Allan and Roberta took a new lease of life just when, in the English way, Summer suddenly descended upon a world that, clad still in its Winter garments, was looking optimistically for Spring.

About this time, too, Guen's new book suddenly acquired a meaning, and she found time to notice that something was happening to Allan. But before she was able to discover what it was she was swept off to Kent to look at a house Gore had found there, so that in the end it was quite by accident that she stumbled on the fact of Allan's friendship with Roberta. Coming home late one evening she encountered them at the station, and, because there was no help for it, Allan took the bold course.

"Guen," he said, "I think you know Miss Leigh?"

For a second, in Guen's mind, the name leapt meaninglessly. Then she remembered. That day in October—and those three letters to Jan. This, then, was why there had never been a fourth! "Of course," she said. "How do you do, Miss Leigh?"

When Allan came in a quarter of an hour later she asked him if he saw much of Roberta.

"Yes, I suppose I do," Allan said.

"Do you find her interesting?"

"Interesting? Good God, she bores me to death!"

"Then why see quite so much of her?"

"I think it's only one side of me that's bored, and I can't decide whether that's the important side or not. . . . Oh, I'm blest if I know. Do you?"

Guen looked at him—a soft, penetrating glance with understanding in it and, perhaps, a little regret.

"I think I do," she said. "But it's rather a pity, isn't it?"

He flashed out then in defence of Roberta. She had never had a chance: it wasn't her fault if she was stupid. . . .

"Nor your mission to correct it," said Guen. "Is that what you think you're doing?"

"Perhaps. I don't know. . . . I think I try. I read her things, lend her books . . . take her to see good plays."

Guen laughed, as though she did not take this queer friend-



INTRUSION

99

very seriously—or as though she considered this part of 's education had already been sufficiently delayed. Perhaps she was vaguely sorry he had not taken her into his confidence and sorry, too, only less vaguely, that Allan's first wife should be Roberta. Yet there were things, she supposed, even a Roberta could teach him. But as though the knowledge annoyed her she switched the conversation suddenly into another channel.

"Here are two pieces of news for you," she said. "The first is Tony's offering you a job on his new paper. He hopes to start in September. The second seems to me rather important, but I'm probably prejudiced. Don't jump. This. Tony and I are to be married on Friday morning."

596945 A

CHAPTER TEN

1

CONCESSIONS to Friday's ceremony in the Registry Office at Bloomsbury were few. Guen's appeared to begin and end with a new costume; Allan's with an extension of his normal luncheon hour and the substitution of Rumpelmeyer's for Slater's. But John Suffield abandoned work for the day and took his family off to a *matinée* when Allan had gone back to the office and Antony and Guen had caught the three something to Havering Hill where Antony had found the house Guen had re-named "Green Hedges" and in favour of which she had at last consented to leave the suburbs. They believed, Guen and A.G., that the place in which to spend your honeymoon was the place in which you intended to live—if it was nice enough. And Guen and Antony seemed to think "Green Hedges" was.

Anne Suffield—who had gone to the altar with orange blossom, old point lace, and half a dozen bridesmaids—took the day calmly. All the same, she would certainly have agreed with Roberta that it was "the queerest wedding." And Roberta said that to Allan on the following Monday when he took her to the Czecho-Slovak concert at the Queen's Hall. The concert bored her extremely, and to make up for it Allan suggested that on the coming Saturday afternoon they should walk out into the country. But the weather had suddenly become very hot and Roberta didn't fancy, she said, walking "all down those country roads."

"We won't go near the roads," Allan said. "We'll keep to the field paths."

"You don't," Roberta told him. "You always leave them and walk where it says 'Private,' or 'Trespassers will be prosecuted.' You *have* got a nerve." Roberta never could see that a walk was improved by the possibility of police-court proceedings to follow; and she thought Allan was merely being

"clever," as he probably was, when he said that he was the special instrument, under Providence, of improving the knowledge of the gamekeepers as to the iniquitous game laws of England and the private ownership of land.

The heat on Saturday was intense, and Allan was tired and hot when he met Roberta at Charing Cross. But neither heat nor cold made the least difference to Roberta's appearance. She took the summer sun as she took the northern wind, with beauty. She remained always a marvel and delight to the eye. The heat never fagged her out as it did Allan; but she was incorrigibly lazy and did not care for walking in the way Allan cared for it—even now after that injury to his leg. But on this afternoon she was especially amiable and agreeable, and Allan, for once, did not want to talk. They took train considerably farther down the line than usual, and made themselves comfortable under some trees in a friendly wood, and at intervals Allan read aloud to her. She was amiable, too, about that: more amiable certainly than Allan, who wished Roberta was less definitely the sort of person who said, "Yes, all right, you know," if you asked whether or not she liked what you read. Sometimes she said, "I don't know, quite, what it all means; but then you don't, with poetry, do you? You either do or you don't, *reely*." She had no criteria at all, and could not in the least understand why she ought to prefer Browning to Ella Wheeler Wilcox, nor why it was so delightful that a man named Herrick should have thought of calling a primrose "the sweet infanta of the year." Allan had tried to read modern verse to her, but the violence of war imagery disgusted her and it was difficult, somehow, to escape it. Difficult also to know where to begin in this matter of Roberta's education, for her knowledge of literature was infinitesimal. She couldn't, she said, "see the use of poetry"; but for Browning Allan had elicited a faint meed of appreciation, probably because he read well and was sensible enough to choose the dramatic monologues. Scott's stories in verse and in prose sent her to sleep. In Shakespeare she cared only for the story and then found fault with it. With Dickens and Thackeray she had the merest nodding acquaintance. Of Shelley she knew nothing save some horrible version of his life story, and Allan discovered with a pang that she agreed with Lord Coleridge's opinion of his moral character—or would have done so

had she been acquainted with it. Of Keats she knew no more than that he had been a chemist, and Allan gathered that she thought he would have been of considerably more use to the world as a chemist than as a poet.

"Why couldn't he find something cheerful to write about?" Roberta inquired presently. "Personally, I can't see why anybody should want to write about autumn. It's a beastly season of the year. Enough to depress a saint."

"I have a sister who would agree with you. She thinks the poets are a gloomy lot."

Roberta smiled. "Well, they are," she said. "Still, you know, I'm not lit'ry."

She stretched her arms above her head and laughed up into the face of the day, and as Allan looked at her something stirred within him, like some faint quiver of his soul. She had the beauty of the early summer—of the blue sky and the white clouds, of the green hills and soft winds.

Presently Allan went on with his reading, and when he had finished she said nothing—only rolled over and propped herself up on her elbows, laughing softly.

"I tell you," she said, "I'm not lit'ry."

"It doesn't matter," Allan said.

Silently Roberta relaxed her elbows and laid her arms along the cool grass, her fingers plucking at it. Allan watched her split the blades neatly down the centre and throw them away. He did not speak. He had forgotten Keats. He was thinking that Roberta's hands were the least pretty part of her. They were short and plump and the finger-tips were square. Allan had a weakness for beautiful hands. Caryl had them—and Madeleine. Madeleine especially, as he remembered suddenly—and to his own surprise. They were long, with tapering fingers and finely modelled nails, and he used to wonder how a girl who used a typewriter managed to retain them. Madeleine's hands, for the young Suffields, had set a standard of beauty, and Maurice Linton had once taken a plaster cast of them and hung them upon a nail on his wall. Heaven only knew what had become of them now: the Lintons were not the sort of folk to want other people's hands upon their walls. . . . A gust of impatience ran through the corridor of Allan's mind, chasing out the vivid memory and banging the door upon it. What nonsense it all was! Why was the long,

slim hand any more beautiful than the short, plump one that had dimples at the knuckles, as Roberta's had? The very sight of it somehow stopped the current of his thoughts. He said again, stupidly, "It doesn't matter."

"It does—sometimes," Roberta said. "Sometimes it matters a lot."

"Does it?"

"You know it does!"

He drew himself nearer to her. Her white, thick hands in the grass were still. She looked at him archly, without turning her head, and deep down within him that something that had stirred before stirred again—a sensation curiously painful.

"It doesn't matter to-day, anyway," he said. "Perhaps it never really did."

"But you'd like me better, wouldn't you, if I were lit'ry?"

"I couldn't like you—better."

Her oblique smile flashed again. He went nearer and with a single movement pulled her up sharply to him. Suddenly she lifted her arms and put them round his neck. His grip tightened, then, scarcely realising what he did, he lifted her chin with his own and fastened his mouth on hers.

Afterwards, watching her as she lay back on the grass, the thought came to him that this was the first time he had ever kissed a girl, and he was twenty-seven. It seemed ridiculous. But mixed up with his sense of absurdity was a sense of satisfaction because, though Roberta had struggled at the last second to be free, she had, in the first, submitted. She had *wanted* to be kissed, or, at least, had wanted him to kiss her. Even there, in those moments of intoxicating aftermath, the subtle distinction between the two states of mind was not entirely lost upon him. Even now the Puritan that lurked somewhere within Allan raised its head and frowned at him over the hot wall of his high ecstasy.

"Shall we go and look for tea?" he said presently.

"All right," said Roberta, staring at her face in a few inches of pocket looking-glass. She sounded extraordinarily matter-of-fact and self-possessed; and Allan, cramming his Keats down into his pocket, wondered for an instant why he should resent it, why he should have this feeling that he had been tricked and trapped.

2

Tea, that afternoon, had about it a note of intimacy which had belonged to no other that had preceded it. It had, too, on Roberta's part, a subtly proprietorial air which Allan found both amusing and disturbing. But what was infinitely more disturbing was the way in which, at intervals throughout the meal, Allan found himself thinking of nothing but Roberta's eyes and mouth. . . . Even her air of wanting to please him was a little disconcerting, because Allan was so unused to it. With him Roberta had usually rather overdone that amiable trick she had of condescending to the male creature who took her about and stood her meals. Here to-day, for the first time, she seemed to Allan to be taking pains over him, as though, belatedly, she had at last decided that he was worth while. She had taken the trouble, Allan thought—a little savagely even amid this new ecstatic happiness—to bring the whole of herself out with him. He couldn't remember that she had ever done it before. Here, this afternoon, there was suddenly very much more of her than he had imagined, and the knowledge pleased him, so that throughout the meal a sense of satisfaction burned steadily through to him. He was happier than he ever remembered to have been before—or more conscious, perhaps, of his happiness, and when Roberta told him presently that he was eating nothing at all he laughed. Because tea was not a meal, an occasion when you ate and drank, but a queer throbbing delight, an interlude of passionate joy—a wild sensing of days just as wonderful to come.

He saw that Roberta, too, looked happy. He did not see, what was equally obvious, that she also looked triumphant.

3

They set out to walk to the station, and it was Roberta's fault that they found themselves instead inside the local cinema. Allan, who was not addicted to the "pictures," had demurred that it would make them too late in getting home. He had no desire to cross propriety swords with Mrs. Leigh and was very uncertain about the time of the last train. But Roberta knew. She was very positive—had heard the porter telling someone that afternoon at the station. And Roberta

carried her point because Allan had a sudden enticing vision of close seats, lowered lights, Roberta's misty hair and bright eyes. The vulgar truth swept over him. He wanted to sit there in the dark with Roberta, holding her hand, perhaps. . . . He forgot Mrs. Leigh brandishing the drawn sword of propriety.

As he sat there at the back with Roberta he was conscious every now and then of a sense of irritation that the cinema should be so banal and so vulgar when there were so many other things it might have been. But he did not think of the cinema overmuch. His sensations—in so far as he realised them at all—were of being separate and remote; of being caught up from himself and from life and held suspended midway between that world of reality and some other that was dazzling and bewitching and beckoning. At times he struggled to climb up or to climb down; but for the most part he let himself dangle, content to feel Roberta's cool hand in his, to note the beauty of the white line of her profile in the half dark, the flash of even teeth and her little tantalising, downward smile. . . .

When at last he thought of the time, sudden panic seized him. It had already turned the half-hour past ten. The station was some distance off, and he was not too sure of its direction. He seized his hat and rushed Roberta out into the street. Afterwards it seemed to him that they must have run all the way to the station: he remembered that he had held Roberta's hand in his, that he had pulled her roughly along when she showed signs of flagging, and that as they entered the station a porter on the other platform shouted across to them that there was plenty of time. Allan's heart gave a bound of relief. He released Roberta's hand and snatched at his personal dignity.

"Last train down from this side, sir!" the porter cried. "Eleven five."

"But it's the London train we want," Allan objected. His voice was slightly querulous; it indicated a pained surprise that anyone should imagine he could possibly want to be going down the line at that time of night. The porter remained calm.

"Last London train leaves at ten-forty, sir!" he replied.

"Ten-forty? Then we've missed it!"

The porter accepted that.

"That's it, sir," he said.

"We've done it!" Allan said briefly to Roberta. Mechanically his mind registered the fact that she stood there looking pale and a little frightened. Long afterwards he remembered that expression on her face. Fright and something else not so easily defined: but certainly not surprise. Months later he would have sworn to that in a court of law.

"There must be some way of getting home," Roberta said. "It's so absurd."

"How in the world," Allan asked her, "did you come to make such a mistake?"

"I don't know. . . . I made sure that was what he said. Last train eleven-five, Marylebone. It's no good glaring at me: you don't suppose I wanted to miss the train, do you?"

"I'm not glaring at you," Allan said. "It's my fault. I oughtn't to have chanced it. I'm afraid we've got to stay here for the night."

"But there *must* be some way of getting home," Roberta said again. "I'm tired. . . . I'll sit down while you go and find out."

Allan went. He was away some fifteen minutes or so, and when he returned Roberta had taken off her hat and was leaning back against the wall of the station with her eyes closed. The bright moonlight had robbed her of colour, leaving her a red-gold mist for hair and a face and neck of alabaster. Allan wanted to kick himself. He had set out to help and look after her—and this was how he began! He was a fool! As though the conviction humbled him, he stooped and kissed the top of her head.

"It's all right," he said, at which Roberta opened her eyes and sat up.

"There is a train, after all?"

"No—not until the seven-twelve to-morrow morning. I tried to get a conveyance. No luck. But the porter says his wife will put you up. Come along, I'll take you down."

"What about you?"

"I? Oh, I'm going for a walk! . . . Afterwards I can shake down here. I'll be all right. I don't matter. It's you. Do you think you'll get into a row?"

Roberta jammed on her hat.

"Oh, I don't know. . . . I dare say. It's quite the sort of thing mother's likely to make a fuss about."

"Well—you can hardly blame her."

"Oh, mother's impossible! She doesn't trust people—you'll have to stick up for me."

He would do that, he said. But he hoped Mrs. Leigh was going to be reasonable. His eyes rested, thoughtfully, upon the daisies that grew on the railway bank, looking like big stars beneath the white moon. And again he hoped Roberta's mother would be reasonable. It wasn't the sort of situation he'd care to argue about.

Outside the porter's house he shook hands with Roberta, but did not offer to kiss her. He was too uneasy for that. He realised, vaguely, that Roberta was uneasy too, and at the back of his mind lurked the knowledge that when you took a girl out into the country you did not miss the last train home. You were most careful about that. It really did matter.

The mood of the afternoon had gone: so had that—other and different—of the cinema. All that was unreal. The only thing that was real, that existed, was this ridiculous fact that he had allowed Roberta to lose the last train.

It depressed him. It depressed him so much that the idea of a walk and the rest of the night on the station no longer appealed to him. He went into the first inn he came to—he never even knew its name—and asked for a bed. "I shan't need breakfast," he said. "I want to catch the first train to town." He had said something like that to Roberta. "Tell them you don't want breakfast—that you must get home by the first train."

The people at the hotel were accommodating. They were also sympathetic, and while Allan wrote his name in the Visitors' Book they agreed that the train service was painfully inadequate and were quite sure the young lady would be very comfortable with the porter's wife. Later they gave him his bill, promised he should be called in good time and showed him to his room. Allan sat down in it and, feeling not in the least like bed, began to re-read the *Ode to Autumn* that Roberta that afternoon—and Caryl before her—had labelled "depressing." It seemed to him now that they were right. The strain of melancholy was there. For Keats, autumn crowned, even while it killed, the hope that summer had given. It was a world of slain hopes, of unfulfilled promises. Allan shut up the book, turned out the light and got into bed.

But not to sleep.

The green and gold of the afternoon danced before his eyes, and the figure of Roberta, flat in the grass, pulling at the grass with fingers that were thick and short and not beautiful, somehow, like the rest of her.

His thoughts would not leave him. He wondered if she were asleep or if she, too, lay awake, restless and concerned for the morrow, as he was. He got out of bed and drew up the blind. Outside the summer night passed on. The warm air moved about him, and the perfume of syringa and jasmine. Between the dark trees of the garden a silver moon hung, like a lantern. The cool woods on the hill-side where they had lain that afternoon were folded duskily in amethystine. Save for the soft voice of the wind in the trees the silence was unbroken. It seemed, somehow, to hem in the world. . . .

It was a long while before Allan got back into bed, and when, much later, he fell asleep, it was to dream of racing with Roberta through the streets of town after town, his fingers twisted in hers. Once or twice she fell, huddled, at his feet. He pulled her up again and they sped on. The moon faded and the sun came up, and the turquoise morning sky, but they never paused. They were running, he and she, to the end of the world. And then, miraculously, she slipped her hand, darted forward and out-distanced him. He ran on and on, but for all his effort he never gained one inch upon her. He saw her run, staggering, up a green hill above which the sun was heaving his broad shoulder. For one second she paused, threw up her arms in the face of the sun and disappeared. Nothing, when he reached the top, but the green hill and the red-gold sun and the moon-daisies white beneath it.

He awoke shivering, to find it morning and someone knocking at the door.

He hurried to the station with a sense heavy upon him that he had been hurrying like this all night. So vivid as all that had his dream been; it had left him tired and unrefreshed.

Roberta was on the platform, waiting. She looked pale and had not slept well, either, she said. And she had had no breakfast. No one had been up at the house. She had let herself out.

They were very quiet on the way to Marylebone. Roberta spoke little: she smiled when he spoke to her and let her hand

rest within his. The bells for early service were ringing when they got into town. Here and there from tall dark houses communicants stole out and hurried away—each with a hungry look, as Allan thought. He was hungry, too—and Roberta. As they neared Manningtree Avenue she pulled sharply at his arm.

"Go slower . . . it looks so silly to hurry like this."

"Are we hurrying? I didn't know."

"You stride so . . . you've given me a stitch. There's no need to hurry."

"None. . . . None at all. I say, do you feel faint?"

"A little—and oh, Allan, I believe I'm afraid! . . ."

"Why? There's nothing to be afraid of. We haven't done anything to be ashamed of."

"I know. . . . But I *am* frightened. . . ."

He stopped suddenly on the pavement and took her by the arm. For the moment—resolutely, and for Roberta's sake—he put from him the uneasiness of the night, refusing to see in the sagging, bulky figure of Mrs. Leigh any dire personification of Mrs. Grundy.

"Look here, Bobbie," he said, "you're to stop being frightened. There's nothing whatever to feel like that about. We were rather silly and careless—nothing else. No one's going to suggest anything else. It was the sort of mistake anybody could make. An accident. Now, *wasn't* it?"

Roberta didn't look at him.

"Yes," she said, "of course."

"Come along, then," said Allan, "and don't be silly!"

They went on again, past windows in which people sat, furtively pulling at the curtains, in the way Suburbia has, to glance at them. As they went in at the gate of two-hundred-and-two the man from upstairs opened the door and came out with his dog. He said good morning to Roberta and raised his hat: but Allan, turning his head, saw him look at his watch.

"Damn!" he said to himself. Not alone because of the man with the dog and his watch, but because behind the Nottingham lace curtains of the ground floor window he saw the waiting figures of Mr. and Mrs. Leigh. They, too, must have seen the encounter with the man from upstairs. Of course, they had seen. They had seen everything. They had been there at the window all night. That was the impression Allan

received—that they had been standing there behind the curtains all night, watching.

4

It was Mrs. Leigh who opened the door. An odour of bacon rushed out at them; then the door closed again, shutting them inside with the smell. Out there in the narrow passage nobody spoke. Allan and Roberta wiped their mudless boots very carefully upon the mat and followed Mrs. Leigh into the front sitting-room, where Mr. Leigh stood uneasily upon the hearth-rug and fidgeted with the tails of his coat. There was a horrible air of suppressed emotion about Roberta's mother. Her face was white and strained. She said nothing, only moved about the room picking things up and putting them down again. A sort of mental paralysis seemed to have overtaken Allan. His brain felt numb: he could think of nothing to say. Something of the same process seemed to have taken place with Roberta's father, but he recovered more quickly than Allan.

"Mr. Suffield . . . I must really ask for an explanation. . . ."

Mrs. Leigh, as at a given signal, dropped the china dog she was moving for the third time and went over and shut up the window. That, somehow, woke Allan up.

"The explanation, sir, is quite simple. We missed the last train and had to stay the night."

The nervous energy ebbed out of Mrs. Leigh's fingers and feet. They were suddenly still. But her lips moved and her tongue.

"*Missed the train!*" she said. "Why don't you tell us Queen Anne's dead, Mr. Suffield?"

Allan felt suddenly idiotic. He wanted to laugh.

"I imagined you knew," he said. "She's quite famous for being dead."

"Young man," said Mr. Leigh sternly, "people *don't* miss last trains when they take young women out into the country."

"I know it isn't done," said Allan, "but, you see, we did it."

"This is no occasion for levity, Mr. Suffield. You ought to be able to see that for yourself."

"I beg your pardon," said Allan. "I do see that, of course; but I'm afraid, you know, that I don't quite see that it is an occasion for sackcloth and ashes." Sanity returned to him:

the ghost of Queen Anne no longer gibbered at him from the dead centuries. He only saw Roberta standing there on the edge of tears: her face white and frightened and puckered up in a fashion horribly pathetic. He began to explain. . . . "We caught the very first train back this morning . . ." he finished. "We didn't even wait for a meal."

He saw suddenly that it would have been better if they had. He saw it before Roberta's mother came and sat in her tempestuous fashion on a chair in the middle of the room and said she wished to God they had.

"Coming in 'ere at half-past eight in the morning. . . . What do you *think* people think?—specially that woman upstairs, who knows Roberta didn't come home last night as well as I know it myself. It'd have looked more natural-like if you'd come in about one—as if you were coming to lunch. Now it'll be all over the road by to-morrow morning."

"I can't see what it has to do with the neighbours," Allan said. He was amazed at her passion: it seemed wasted, somehow, to him, on mere neighbours. He couldn't, for the life of him, see where the neighbours came in, even allowing for that man and his watch. . . .

"Who *else* has it got to do with, then? It's the neighbours that matter," enunciated Mrs. Leigh.

"I really can't see it," Allan said. "I can't see that anybody's concerned but you and Mr. Leigh. I have given you the truth! If you accept it, there is nothing more to be said—save that I'm very sorry indeed I ever allowed it to happen."

Mrs. Leigh took out her handkerchief and began to weep into it. Mr. Leigh turned and gazed into the empty grate, then away from it to the shut window as if, even now, the eagle eye of one of the neighbours might be glued to it.

"You don't understand," Mrs. Leigh sobbed. "It isn't that I don't believe what you say, nor yet her father, neither. I'm sure we trust you, Mr. Suffield. I've always said you were a gentleman. It isn't that. But I've been through this sort of thing before. After what has happened she really couldn't afford to do it, Mr. Suffield. I always said we ought to have moved out of the neighbourhood—though where we should have gone, goodness knows."

"Now, mother, leave it alone," advised her husband. "No use crying over spilt milk."

"But you needn't keep on spilling it," Mrs. Leigh said.

Once again Allan was caught by that tremendous desire for laughter, and once again mysteriously kept from laughter by something he read in Roberta's face.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," he said.

Something at that seemed to happen to Roberta. The colour came to her face and she took a step forward. "Oh, do shut up, mother!" she said.

But Mrs. Leigh showed no inclination to do anything of the sort.

"Now, my girl," she said, "you listen to me. You can pack your things and take yourself off. You can't say I haven't warned you. Once in a lifetime's sufficient. I won't have you at home no more. So you know. . . ."

Roberta's tears fell in a sudden shower over her face. She made no attempt to wipe them away: they ran salt into her mouth as she opened it to speak.

"I haven't done *anything*, mother. I haven't done anything at all."

"You've done enough, my girl. You've done too much by half. And now you go!"

Her phrases fell like a lash upon Allan's understanding. The fog of her innuendo smothered him.

"I can't imagine what you mean," he said. "You can't possibly be meaning to turn Roberta out of the house because of this occurrence, especially as you say you accept my version of the facts. There's something behind it all. If it concerns me . . . or my brother, perhaps . . . I think I ought to hear it."

Mrs. Leigh blew her nose and said that it didn't concern him or his brother, but that she thought he ought to be told.

"Don't be a fool, Martha!" her husband cautioned her from the window, and Roberta—a new, distracted, agitated Roberta—cried out in protest.

"Oh, mother, please. . . . Not that old story. Please . . . please. It isn't fair!"

What happened after that was never very clear to Allan, save what came at the end. For the rest of his life he carried with him a vague recollection of a number of things happening at once and of something queer and unexpected happening suddenly to himself there at the end. With the passing of time they made, all of them, in his mind a faint grey mist, out of

which Roberta's wet face rose always and stabbed at him. . . .

But they were clear and actual that Sunday morning, for all he comprehended them so little. Roberta and her mother in tears, their raised voices and that of Mr. Leigh hushing them down, his eyes wandering all the time to the window; the steady rise and fall of Mrs. Leigh's voice and the gradual implacable emerging of the story she had to tell—the story of Delia King, known of all the neighbours and that woman upstairs. . . .

It stood there stark and sheer when Mrs. Leigh had done with it. Poor little Delia King! Between them they left her nothing—not even her breathless oblivion nor the dark secrecy that was the grave! The sight of her standing there naked and shamed in her compassionate youth hurt Allan to the soul. His garment of speech closed round her tenderly.

"I shall be honoured, Mrs. Leigh," he said, "if Roberta will be my wife."

He hadn't meant to say it. The words surprised nobody more than they surprised him, but he did not wish them unsaid. Under cover of them poor little Delia King stole back to her grave, and Allan was worried by the sight of her no longer. Suppliant, he held out his hands to Roberta.

"Bobbie," he said, "will you marry me?"

5

Half an hour later they were eating fried bacon and buttered toast and Mrs. Leigh was saying that all was well that ended well. She seemed very certain of that.

For the edification of the neighbours they went, presently, for a walk before dinner, which was to be ready at two o'clock. And to edify the neighbours still further Mr. Leigh went with them, and his wife came to the gate to see them off. In the afternoon Allan and Roberta sat in the front room and Roberta played tunes on the cracked piano. She played the wrong things and she played them badly. . . . It was a long time before Allan had her to himself. . . .

That afternoon she was, perhaps, as near to loving him as she ever came, and though she was exultant and triumphant she was grateful, too. For Allan was going to take her away from this poky little house and from her mother's suspicions and muck-rakings in the past. She hated her mother, but she

was fond of Allan—fonder than she had ever been of anyone before, unless it was Jan—and him she had already forgotten. Besides, Jan had never asked her to marry him.

But Allan had—as she had meant he should, since that day when she had first seen him as her means of escape. Not that it had been too easy—there had been a risk in that idea of the train. . . .

For Allan there was no escape. He was caught in the web of her scheming and of her beauty—a web hung with bryony and jasmine and heavy with scent. The wings of his soul fluttered once, as if to find hers, and were still. The web was strong and held. He could not escape.

But he was very happy.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

1

ALLAN'S courtship was very much like all other courtships, save that he had no standards whereby to judge it. Against the days that were quite certainly happy were others that just as certainly were not. Against the when Allan lived, with uplifted air, as one about to a tremendous discovery, there were others when the world lled to the dimensions of the Comet office or the span berta's pretty arms. And certainly at this period he discovered anything worth discovering, save that an ement can be a disappointing affair, and that there were when the very thought of Roberta tortured him: when he t hated her—not because she had so much of him, but se she hadn't *all* of him, because there were reserves out ch, that she did not even suspect. Yet, on the whole, days, she was affable, good-humoured and patient. it she needed to be, for Allan was at times distinctly . He could no more accept Roberta as he found her he could accept the world. Behind the mask-like y of the Roberta to whom he was engaged he saw always age of some other Roberta he imagined she could become o whom he would like much better to be engaged. And ta, who was enjoying the rôle of engaged girl and would been extremely bored by this vision of her metamorphic acrificed at this time quite a number of her own inclina- to keep her reformer-lover in good humour. She did not im to criticise her or to find fault—not because she had d that stage when the arrows of disapproval could pierce en the armour of her *amour-propre*, but because she ed that it was necessary to stem the tide of Allan's critical acies until marriage had built up the sea-wall that would t. That was why she tried to say "nice" and "good night" d of "naice" and "good naight" which came so much

more easily, but which had an extraordinarily irritating effect upon Allan. For the same reason, though she made up for it by reading her novelettes in bed at night, she suffered Allan to direct her literary education, and formed part of the *intelligentsia* in the pit to see "high brow" plays, stifling her yearning for "fluff" and the *revue*.

But God, tempering the wind, had sent the Russian Ballet and here Allan and Roberta met on something like common ground. For they both loved the Russian Ballet. That they loved it for different reasons didn't matter, though they certainly did. Roberta went to the Russian Ballet for much the same reason as respectable paterfamilias from the suburbs went to see *Kismet* and *Chu Chin Chow*, and Allan's talk of design, of co-ordination and setting mystified her, as did his flat refusal to read the "story" beforehand. M. Diaghileff's productions, however, were undoubtedly a godsend, and Allan and Roberta went night after night to the Alhambra and saw Karsavina, Lopokova, Lydia Kyasht, Massine and the rest, and heard the music of Rimsky-Korsakoff and Maurice Ravel and Stravinsky and Moussorgsky and (incidentally) how many times their neighbours had heard it before.

Even the Russian Ballet, however, did not entirely wipe out Allan's moods of wretchedness which at times touched profundity. It wasn't always Roberta's affected pronunciation nor her constitutional inability to spell; but the fact that she attracted so much notice. There were times when he could have murdered the men who sat opposite her in a bus. He hated people to stare at her, though he knew that if he'd been in their place he would have stared just the same. He always felt somehow that Roberta enjoyed the attention she evoked. Frequently she didn't attend in public to what he said: her replies were absent and she smiled too much. "What's funny?" Allan would say, and at her "Nothing," rage would consume him. "Then what are you smiling for?" he would say, and Roberta would blush and look angry (which only made her nicer to look at), and the man opposite would glare as though he considered him a bully who didn't deserve his luck. Worst of all, however, were the days when their outings together were spoiled because of the things that came between—the things he knew, the many more he imagined: the kisses other men had given her, the kisses Jan had given her.

Sometimes, perversely, he talked to her of Jan, and she showed no disinclination until she saw it made him angry. After that nothing would induce her to respond, and sometimes that, too, made him angry: a black devil of jealousy sat in his heart and spoilt their hours together, until Roberta discovered that the charm which worked was her tears. He never could stand seeing her cry. But at such times Allan could not have said whether he hated her because she had known Jan or because she had already forgotten him.

That, however, was an incident of which Allan's family knew nothing. And Allan's family had accepted Roberta, though he thought that they might not have earlier kept Allan awake at nights, as it certainly had not kept Roberta. To that initial interview Roberta took her best clothes and the assurance of her beauty, believing that, in their hearts, people cared more for that in a woman than anything else. Anne Wiffield, it is true, wrote to Guen that she thought there ought to be more mental equality between a man like Allan and the girl he was going to marry: but Guen knew she wasn't really worried; scarcely even surprised. Her belief that the chief characteristic of her children was that they did the things you least expected of them, was by this time firmly rooted. Pen, too, thought Allan ought to marry somebody who would look after him (an operation she thought no man could manage for himself) and give him children, but her attitude did not lack affability though unbroadened by ostentation, so that Roberta had nothing really to complain of. Considering her reading of Roberta, Pen was strictly decent; amazingly decent, according to Tom (who thought all women were cats") when you remembered how Roberta's looks spoilt her wits.

But if Roberta's subjugation of Pen lacked completeness, it lacked nothing where Allan's father was concerned. John Wiffield's leaning was always more towards looks (in a woman) than brains, and Roberta, he thought, combined the maximum of looks with as many brains as was necessary. She was no fool. She was shrewd and ambitious, and would correct Allan's idiotic tendency to behave as though money didn't matter. The picture of Roberta keeping Allan's nose to the grindstone seemed to afford Allan's father much private satisfaction, so that he not only accepted Roberta, but Roberta's

father and mother—a much more difficult matter. With an uncanny skill he ignored Mrs. Leigh's tendency to abolish the letter "h" and her husband's to abolish Conservatives and landlords and the private ownership of land. He even swallowed the warehouse and Henry Leigh's unsatisfactory position in it, and was properly snubbing to Pen when she said that the only word she could think of when she saw Mrs. Leigh was *avoirdufois*.

There remained Caryl and Guen.

Caryl, like her father, had been instantly subjugated. What she liked about Roberta was her vitality; her unashamed joy in herself and in life and her unliterary attitude towards it. Intellect, so Caryl thought, had been overdone in the Suffield family, and Allan had more than enough for two people. Intellect was apt to get in the way. There was such a thing as being too clever. You might as well be dead as too clever: you'd be happier, anyway. Roberta, so Caryl said, was a very necessary piece of leaven and she would have beautiful babies.

"*Babies!*" said Pen. "She won't have any!"

"Rot, of course she will!" Caryl said, "she's just the sort. You've only got to look at her."

"I don't know what you're driving at," Pen said, "unless you mean that it's the brainless women who have the children."

"Who make the best job of it," amended Caryl. "The brainy woman either doesn't have any children, or doesn't want 'em or comes to grief over the business. Not always, I know, but it's a pretty safe generalisation. I think Nature ought to do better: she ought to sort us out. Perhaps she will a thousand years hence. The women with brains, who think brains matter most and want to do the world's work, won't be able to have children, won't want 'em and won't be expected to have 'em. I daresay the old-fashioned sort of men will be rude about them in the Press, but at least we'll know where we are."

Pen laughed.

"Which would you want—the brains or the babies?"

"Both," said Caryl. "I shouldn't fit in. Wouldn't it be perfectly damnable?"

2

, too, was the phrase Guen employed when she received her's letter with its news of Allan's engagement. Allan's letter came afterwards and was brief. Worse, it told her so. She replied, also saying nothing, save that Allan was to see her on Saturday.

Went. As, on the whole, a painful interview—so painful that trying afterwards to see just exactly where it had taken root it all down in a long letter to Madeleine, but tore when it was finished as though she did not care, after she saw quite so plainly where she and Allan had landed her; or did not care, perhaps, for Madeleine to see it. She had hoped to do with Allan had never been very out whatever it was she had failed completely. She had nothing at all, save stare at Allan across a stretch of country, shouting out things in a language that had to be common. She could have cried out with relief when the luncheon bell rang and she could escape.

Over luncheon the conversation showed a tendency to run on trivialities until Gore, arriving in the middle of it, cut it for a time into the channels of his own particular interests. He wanted a critical article, he said, on Galdo's work and seemed to think it unreasonable of Allan not to say anything about them. Also, he wanted articles concerned with the Drama of Ideas, and upon the art of Nijinsky and Balanchine. Massine, according to Gore, had missed the vital part of *Scheherazade*. He made you think that the black desired the white women, and Tony thought it was the way round. Massine, too, was never really tragic—grotesque almost, at times. Allan agreed and was commissioned to do the article.

3

When Allan had gone Guen sat down to write to Madeleine. Her letter plunged because, already, Madeleine had the facts. A week ago—had written them, and Madeleine had not answered. Neither had she congratulated Allan. She wouldn't, she, Guen said. She didn't, these days, write—ever—to

Allan. Caryl had shrugged her shoulders. "Well, she might stretch a point in a case like this. She might just say she hoped he would be happy, anyway."

So far, however, Madeleine had not done anything of the sort. And Guen's letter was not intended as a reminder. It was an attempt not to explain to Madeleine, but to explain to herself; and, anyway, it was never sent.

I so badly want to talk to you, my dear Madeleine, and you aren't here and there's nobody else. Not even Tony. Tony on this point is dense. He isn't really interested in women except when they "do" things, and Roberta doesn't, so he says. He won't see that she has already done too much. He thinks I'm making a fuss over nothing. And I'm not.

For Allan's been here—and I know. It was like shouting across a desert in a sandstorm. I felt thwarted and desolate, and Allan had, all the time, the look of one guarding his defences. But I did once or twice get beneath them. I did see—I see now—why he's going through with this, and why, in a sense, it has to be. More than all else, perhaps, it was the look of him. It wasn't that he looked ill, though he didn't, I thought, look too well. He was pale and owned to a headache. I daresay he overdoes it. But it was his eyes that gave him away: that said quite plainly what his lips guarded so jealously—for in words he told me nothing. (I wish I didn't keep remembering that Allan used to tell me most things.) I got the sense of things having sprung upon him from some hidden corner. Quite suddenly he's appallingly grown-up—*adult*. It's so absurd that Roberta—that stupid little person we rescued that day in October (do you remember?) from the rain—could have done all that. And to Allan! Yet you simply can't look at him without realising how much "all that" is—and what it means.

There isn't, anyway, the least doubt about that. Nothing anyone could do or say would prevent his marrying Roberta. And that is just, of course, what he oughtn't to do. . . . Morality seems a farce in the face of this . . . this disaster: that, I am sure, is what it is or will be. And none of us can stop it. That's the awful thing. It's like watching a street accident that you can see coming but can't prevent.

It would be better, somehow, if Allan believed less in marriage and what it could do for you. Not that he would admit that, however. He wasn't admitting anything; but for all that I felt he did think I ought to understand—something he thought I didn't: that he wanted, violently, to make me, and that the violence of his desire hurt and puzzled him. I believe I said something disparaging of marriage: bad taste, of course, in a woman happily married. He said, "Well, you look as if marriage agreed with *you*, anyway." I said that it ought and reminded him that Luther said it was what we were here for. We agreed that Luther had rather overdone it. I said that marriage had been "overdone" altogether; talked up and talked down and the truth falling, as truth always does, of course, to the ground.

"But you like being married?" he asked me.

I said I liked being married to Tony.

He said he supposed that mattered tremendously, whom one married.

I said that it mattered everything.

He said what about the women who didn't seem to care whom they married as long as they married somebody? What would they make of my "everything"?

I said "Nothing"; but that they wouldn't, either, make anything of anything at all. With them it was like jumping into the sea to escape a lion: they were so much more afraid of the lion.

"You mean they're much more afraid of never being married than of marrying the wrong man?"

I said: "Something like that. . Now tell me about yourself and Roberta."

Of course, he didn't. At least, he didn't tell me anything I didn't know or hadn't guessed. They're to be married soon; wretchedly soon because there's a man at the Comet who's being sent abroad and they've the chance of his house. Roberta, Allan said, was in no hurry. "And you?" I asked.

He wouldn't answer that. I said, "You are. You think marriage is a miracle-worker. It isn't."

Allan said "Good God! Do you think I've reasoned it out like that? I only know that I can't live without her." I didn't say anything to that because I couldn't think of

anything to say except "But can you live *with* her?" which didn't seem adequate—or too adequate. Anyway, it seemed to me much more important. We sat and looked at each other, and presently Allan said, "I don't know what you're driving at. Or perhaps (as I smiled) I do. But it isn't any good. I'm not made like that. Marriage is the only way out for me—for us. You don't know Roberta. But you know me.

I did.

"Damn," I said. I felt savage. I added, "It *would* be, for you!" I hated Roberta. I'd have shouted for joy if he'd suddenly announced that he was going off to live with her. I think Allan was shocked. Then, thank Heaven, he got angry again and said, "Good God!" and couldn't I understand!

I said I did, but that "that" would come to an end before marriage did. Then I wished I hadn't. And I wanted to cry.

I think, I always knew this would happen. Men like Allan are inevitably the victims of their own natures. Some day he had to wake up. Somebody was going to rouse feelings and desires which till her coming had slumbered. But why is it that the person who can arouse can so seldom satisfy? It's just one little bit of Allan Roberta can get at, and no more. Only he doesn't believe it. He said I was unfair to my sex—as all women are. Even in my rage I smiled at that. His precious Roberta had never had a chance. I'd simply got, he said, to remember that. We had to help her—he and I and the rest of us, I gathered. "That's what I feel," he said, "that I've got to help her. I want to look after her . . . protect her. I can't explain."

But he had, of course. That word "protect" had given it me. Roberta's disadvantages, the things he hated and despised and despaired of in her had given him an object in life. Roberta, he thought, needed him, as none of us ever did. More than mother, now there's the new Jan. That, writ small, is what it all comes down to, yet it struck me then and it strikes me now as ridiculous, because to me it's so obvious that it's Allan who wants looking after. You'd have said so, too, if you'd heard his absurd story about some missed train, the parental wrath and the dragging out of the

family skeleton—because he began then to tell me things. It was just here that the defences broke down. . . . He threw Roberta at me. Roberta with her uncongenial home life, her dull work at the studio and her parents with their outraged conventions. . . . She'd thrown them at Allan often enough, I've no doubt: they caught him, the lot of them, on his vulnerable side that day after the missed train.

"You're like Shelley," I said, "when Harriet caught him by that story of persecution at school." But he isn't really, because Shelley never believed in marriage even when he married his Harriet, and it's pathetic to see how Allan believes in it.

I think that must have been why I made another effort to make him "see." I hated Roberta, but I put her case for her. It wasn't generosity: it was simply that I knew it was no good putting his. He was ready enough to be sacrificed. I saw that so plainly it terrified me, and I was terrified, too, because he seemed to be getting small and distant. I had the sense of shouting as if he were out-distancing me, and my voice had to travel to catch up with him. I had a mental vision of myself trailing over the dusty distances dragging a dishevelled and weary Roberta at my heels, and what I said went, somehow, like this.

"Allan, listen to me. Do please listen to me. Let's see things as they are. You're not going to be rich. Marriage on a small income makes big demands on a girl—unfair demands, doubtless, only if she cares enough it doesn't matter so much, though it's still unfair. How much of that does Roberta understand? Or haven't you discussed it with her?"

Allan said, "She knows, of course, what my position is."

"But does she know what it *means*? Girls don't, very often. There'll be meals to cook, clothes to mend, rooms to clean and, perhaps . . . babies."

"We needn't have any babies."

"You may want them. Oh, not at first, perhaps, but later on."

He said he couldn't discuss that with Roberta. Here's a pretty pair of modern lovers for you! There were actually things they couldn't "discuss." I think I shrugged my shoulders, not a pretty trick, I know, in a plain woman.

But I wanted to shake Allan—to shake sense into him and some of his fantastic illusions out of him. And again I started putting Roberta's case for her. I said:

"Well, I think you ought to discuss it, that's all." (I seemed to be getting angrier: the words kept rushing up quicker than I could get them out.) I went on. "You ought to tell her what things mean, if you think she doesn't know; or do you want to marry a child?" (Roberta a child! But you see how well I put her case!) "It isn't a pretty fact and men don't admit it, I know, but marriage for thousands of women means just their automatic conversion into wife, housekeeper, mother, nurse and maid-of-all-work. It's either worth it (but never so entirely worth it as men imagine) or it isn't worth it at all. But you ought to be certain that it's going to be worth it for Roberta."

Still Allan said nothing. I began to see that he didn't mean to say anything. The distance between us increased. I ploughed after him, but I dropped Roberta. I was getting very tired. Perhaps that was why I let myself go—why I got on to my pet theories and attacked Allan's ridiculous idea of marriage, his extraordinary idea of it as a miracle-worker. I used a lot more words than that and I stopped, presently, to let them sink in. They didn't seem to, somehow. . . .

I plunged again—began to develop my theories. I said that on this business of sex the world was mad: that sex, somehow, had to be put back in its proper place . . . that it had no business to sprawl, indecently, as it does, over the whole of life, and I attacked the marriage that has nothing more than sex behind it, declared that such a marriage wouldn't do for Allan, who would discover that sex feeling is the most fleeting of all human emotions. You couldn't build a future upon it.

Allan laughed. He laughed and was crushing and unconvinced. He said, "Rubbish, old girl, you can't underrate sex like that—or its power."

I knew then that I'd lost: that nothing I could say would touch him. All the same I went on. Heaven only knows why—or what I hoped to achieve. Actually, of course, I achieved nothing. The desert between us flung the words back in my face. . . . I said:

"You're being stupid, Allan . . . or am I? You can't ignore sex: that's as stupid as overrating it, as most people do. The truth is somewhere in between. Marriage—the best sort of marriage—isn't all sex, and love, even sexual love, isn't what the world thinks it: it's finer than mere sentimentality, nobler than desire. It's comradeship and understanding and community of interests and toleration and recognition of the soul in each."

Then I saw Allan's face, and suddenly I found myself throwing Roberta at him again.

"If Roberta can't give you that, Allan, don't, for God's sake, marry her. Because—ultimately—that's what you're going to want."

Well, that was the end, because Allan looked at me and said in that quiet way of his, "My dear old girl, do you know that you're positively shouting?" I said—idiotically—"I had to . . . you wouldn't have heard else." Then we both laughed, but it was the end right enough. Allan began talking suddenly of the police strike and the mobs at Liverpool, and I became intelligent again and stopped wanting to laugh or to cry. I saw that he wasn't going to escape.

That, somehow, wasn't a fact that made you want either to laugh or to cry. You accepted it, quietly, as you always do accept the inevitable. There's always a time when you know you can't do anything, when the most rebellious of us sit down and fold our hands.

Well, there it is. You'd have said that after the war—France—it couldn't happen. The war is supposed to have cured young men of making fools of themselves . . . to have given them insight and understanding. . . . The only thing against that theory is that it isn't true. The war has shifted standards—and muddled them. Experience piled Pelion upon Ossa is worse than no experience at all, and it leaves the more sensitive open to attack at too many points. With Allan Roberta must have had an easy task (and you'll see I'm putting it on to Roberta. I'm so sure that missed train had more significance than meets the eye). Allan stood defenceless: the walls were down. She had him all ways, through his reformist sense; through his eyes and through his newly awakened instincts that had slept too

long. To a Roberta it couldn't have been difficult, for she is, to look at, the most delightful creature. And the worst of it is you'd swear there was something behind the mask. She doesn't *look* empty and yet I'm sure she is. There just isn't anything there at all—that matters.

I don't see that there's anything to be done, except to smudge out of my mind all these beliefs and conjectures concerning Roberta which yet seem so damnably like certainties and will take, I can tell you, some erasing. I've got to start afresh: play the Optimist, believe that Allan is getting what he wants . . . what he wants now . . . without asking myself how long he's going to want it and whether he's going to get it—actually—after all. Even there, you see, I don't trust Roberta.

You see, too, how difficult it is to do the smudging with any will. But I must. At least, Roberta shall have her chance—even with me, who don't want, in the least, to give it her.

It was just here that Guen broke off and tore her letter up, as if she realised that Roberta must have her "chance," too, with Madeleine. And, anyway, her pen had been running away with her.

4

Allan and Roberta were to be married in August. The young man at the Comet had gone off earlier to his foreign appointment than was expected and the opportunity of securing his house was too good to be missed. So, at least, Roberta said to Caryl, who agreed. Guen agreed, too, but stood there staring out across the months to come as across centuries. Caryl, catching her at it on one of her home visits, waxed scornful.

"My dear old thing," she said, "all this fuss because Bobbie isn't 'booky' or 'brainy!' You're as bad as Pen. Yes, you are, you're snobs, both of you. For Pen Bobbie's family isn't good enough (Pen's beastly about Mrs. Leigh and she's a dear!); for you it's her brains. I should have thought Allan had more than enough for two. As a family we seem rather to run to brains."

"It's a good fault, isn't it?" Guen asked.

"I don't know," said Caryl. "I can't help wishing something that my features got on a little better together. It would be jolly to have a face that's as . . . harmonious . . . as Bobbie's. It ought to be possible to buy fresh faces at the

"It is—more or less," Guen said. "If we think it worth

"Oh, *that!*" said Caryl.
Guen laughed.

"My dear child, you should have taken the precaution of falling in love with a man who never looks at faces."

"What do you mean? Can't one get tired of one's mug without your drawing unwarrantable conclusions?"

"Quite," said Guen. "I apologise. Your aspirations after beauty are, of course, strictly impersonal."

It was as though she knew they weren't she opened the subject with Pen, who since Guen's marriage had come with Tom Master Jan to live at Adelaide Lodge. And Pen wasn't a satisfactory this evening: a little *distracte*, too, for she was missing her small son. Oh yes, she believed Caryl still saw that man Merrick at the Hestons. Why not? There wasn't anything in that—now. Oh, on *his* side once, perhaps; but she had choked *him* off. So Jack Heston had said, anyway, as she'd choked *him* off. Caryl hadn't any use for men of that sort of way. She was like Madeleine. To both of them men were like tables and chairs, nice useful things that were wanted when you wanted them. They only wanted men as they pleased. . . . Pen gathered that young Merrick was interested in the moment in Marjorie's quarter. But Guen wasn't sure Marjorie had never been anything to Guen but a pink and white doll with quantities of fair, fluffy hair, who was bound to be fat, anyway. . . . "Queer, isn't it?" Pen said, "that it's like that about men, because she's so fond of men. . . ."

But Guen had ceased to listen. She had forgotten Caryl and the significance (or otherwise) of Richard Merrick. She was thinking of the rosy curves of Baby Jan's body and wishing they were given him some other name.

BOOK II

CHAPTER ONE

1

ALLAN and Roberta spent their honeymoon in the Isle of Wight. Allan had suggested a tiny village he knew by the Devon sea, but Roberta had stuck to Shanklin. She did not want, she said, to be buried alive in Devon.

Later, it occurred to Allan that Roberta did not intend to be buried alive anywhere at all. Quite early she let him see that very plainly indeed. "We may just as well look at the place now we're here," she said, and frowned upon his tendency to go and sit with her upon the cliffs. Roberta hadn't bought her fine clothes for the purpose of sitting in them upon the cliffs. And even from Allan's point of view the cliffs were not wholly satisfactory, for beyond Sandown their walks were circumscribed by barbed wire and notices which warned them of unexploded hand grenades and poison gas. Roberta, who thought the war had stopped long ago, found them amusing; Allan, who knew it hadn't, did not. More, too, than that. He was constitutionally incapable of connecting the war with anything amusing or "funny," as Roberta put it. Roberta thought this a pity, for in this connection she was very proud of him, and was given to saying sweetly at their private hotel, "My husband, you know, will *never* talk about his experiences in France. No one would ever believe he has three wound stripes."

Allan, of course, detested the hotel, though he liked the spot where they had built it—up there on the esplanade they had named after Keats, which was generous of them since Keats, visiting Shanklin for the first time, had decided against it and gone on to Carisbrooke. Allan, as he might have known he would, had decided against the hotel before he had got through

the first evening's dinner. Allan had never liked the people he found in private hotels and "superior" boarding-houses, and after five years of war it was not to be supposed he would like them any better. He hated their approval of himself as a boy who had "done his bit" (which even his aloofness and his unpopular opinions could not disturb), and he hated their air of having, as a class, used up all the available backbone of England. But he was amused by their belief in themselves, in Lloyd George and the Almighty, and by their conception of the Deity as a sort of British Field Marshal raised possibly to the *nth* degree. He knew that many of them had "given" sons in this cause of Humanity that was the War: he knew that others had given money; that still others had made it; but he only saw that they all had excellent appetites and an air of justifying the genial optimism of Browning to the remnants of a youthful generation that had suffered from it.

It was during that first week of pinpricks, when Allan was wondering, at savage intervals, why he hadn't insisted on that cottage on the Devon coast, that there arrived a young man who came in heavily and unexpectedly on Allan's side when these discussions arose. He had brought with him a copy of Siegfried Sassoon's war poems and a small anthology of Verse Written in War Time which Allan hadn't seen. Inside both of these their owner had scrawled his name—Martyn Thorp—and Martyn Thorp and Allan took an instantaneous and warm liking to each other, based upon their agreement upon the subject of war poetry and the people in boarding-houses—who didn't read it. Martyn, it transpired, was at the private hotel because in a day or two his people were to join him there. They would, so Martyn said, fit in: they liked "that sort of place." Martyn, like Allan, did not; but "we haven't had a holiday together for years," he explained. "The mater was keen on it. You see, they sent me to Mesopotamia. You didn't get much leave there. . . ."

But even before the arrival of the parents who liked "this sort of place" and called Roberta "that charming-looking girl," and admired her clothes, they did not see too much of Martyn Thorp, certainly not as much as Roberta would have liked. Martyn had found favour in her sight, never having made the mistake of talking to her about books and politics and dull things of that description. Also it wasn't difficult to see

that he admired Roberta tremendously and considered Allan a "lucky dog." He was younger than Allan, and, for all his talk of the soldier-poets, took life a good deal less seriously. The strain of natural gloom in Allan was altogether missing in young Thorp. In a discussion he was always on the right side: theoretically he was sound, but when it came to practicalities he saw—none clearer—the folly of running your head against a brick wall. He wore an air of cheerful pessimism, as of one who realises that the world is pretty nearly everything it shouldn't be, but who realises, too, that he is not the man to cope with it. The only criticism which at this stage Roberta had to level against her new acquaintance was that he was over-proficient in the gentle art of making himself scarce. He knew well enough (before Roberta told him) that she and Allan were on their honeymoon, but she had not meant that to imply quite so much as he seemed to think it did. She had only meant to quicken his interest in her, to deepen the atmosphere of romance with which, so far as the hotel was concerned, she was quite well aware she had been surrounded. All Roberta's instincts were histrionic: she played always to an audience. Allan, to her surprise, was slightly annoyed that she had "given them away" and reflected that a private hotel was a ridiculous place in which to spend a honeymoon. But Roberta had laughed.

"Well, I did it for you. I thought you believed two's company. You're not very grateful."

Two days later Allan suggested spending the rest of their holiday in a creeper-clad house which they passed on one of their walks and which displayed the phrase "Board Residence." Roberta was amazed.

"Leave the hotel? Don't be absurd, Allan. All my clothes are there. Besides, they'd make you pay for the fortnight, anyway."

"Oh, let them!" said Allan. "It would be worth it. I'd be much nicer here. . . . You'd see . . . and we could do just as we liked."

"But, Allan, we do as we like now . . . and you're quite nice. Really, you are. . . . I'm quite satisfied with you."

"Then you won't come?"

"Don't be silly, Allan; you know we can't do it. . . . It'd look so silly."

"To all that crowd? P'raps; but what do they matter? We shan't see any of them again."

"Why, you said only the other day how nice it would be if Mr. Thorp'd come and see us when we get back."

"I know. Thorp's different. We could write to him from here. He'd understand. I think you might, Bobbie. It'd be such a lark."

But Roberta didn't see it as a lark at all.

"Oh, Allan, *dear*," she said, "I just love being at the hotel. Don't be a beast and drag me away just when I'm having such a good time!"

So Allan gave up the idea and went back and dressed for dinner and was profoundly wretched, because he couldn't forget how happy he would have been if Roberta had agreed to come away with him to the creeper-clad house on the Ventnor Road. That was all, really, that mattered—that she should have *wanted* to come. And she hadn't.

Allan chose that evening after dinner to ask Martyn if he would come and see them when they all got back to London. Martyn said "Rather," and that Roberta must come down and have tea with the mater. The Thorps lived, it seemed, at Bromley. They spoke of it with pride as "the town."

"Of course, we've only got a *tiny* little house," Roberta told him. "Just six rooms, you know, and a bath-room."

"I fancy," said young Thorp, with his frank and charming smile, "that I shan't come exactly to see the house, you know."

Roberta blushed, and Allan reflected that it was really time he began to make some friends. He had never at any time had many, for Maurice Linton had somehow made other friendships unnecessary. Here—and on his honeymoon—he found himself yearning for that old circle of talk and aspiration which had been made up of himself, Guen, Madeleine and Maurice. How they had talked and talked, with the keynote always in harmony and that invisible thread holding them all together! His thoughts of it now seemed to constitute a veritable elegy of friendship.

Vaguely Allan understood that he was disappointed with this first holiday with Roberta. Perhaps that was always how you

felt if you elected to spend your honeymoon in a private hotel. Perhaps it served you right.

But it was more than the hotel of which Allan was critical. His feeling of disappointment extended beyond the hotel garden and its edge of green cliff to the whole of the Garden of England, or as much of it as he managed to see. He did not care at all for the Isle of Wight. He found its air enervating and its inhabitants conservative-minded and suffering from many other of the drawbacks of life on an island. Roberta, however, thrived upon the warmth and did not object to the condition of mind of its inhabitants. She thoroughly enjoyed the drives about the island, and laughed at the interest Allan took in Swinburne's grave at Bonchurch and his need to photograph it. It seemed to Roberta that all the people who had become "classics" had lived or stayed some time or other at Bonchurch. Tennyson had come (and lady admirers, so the guide-book said, had cut up his hat between them), and Thackeray, Dickens and Macaulay. But of them all Roberta most resented Macaulay, because Allan walked her along the road to Ventnor to find the house where he had once resided, and she thought it thoughtful of Swinburne to have lived so near to the place where he had intended to be buried. She thought, too, that Allan might have taken a photograph of her sitting on the gate of East Dene, but Allan wouldn't even let her sit on the gate, but had dragged her into the churchyard, where he used up his films on Swinburne's grave and St. Boniface church. On another day they went to St. Helens and Seaview (where the house where Madeleine had recently lived was marked "To let"), and on another to Carisbrooke, where they tried to decide whether it was Mary Queen of Scots or Charles the First, or neither, who was imprisoned in the castle there. Roberta, on the whole, was inclined to think that her honeymoon was eminently successful. Certainly she had never been so well dressed before nor stayed in so excellently appointed a house (it wasn't Roberta who'd find fault with the hotel!). Her days were pleasant beyond all doubt. In the mornings she bathed (which means that she donned a pretty bathing costume and dabbled about on the edge, withstanding Allan's invitations to "come out here where it's deep"), and in the afternoons she went for a drive and returned just in time to dress herself prettily for dinner. To any but the Robertas

of the world it may well sound dull; but Roberta was very far from finding it dull. She was admired and envied, and because she loved being admired and envied she was happy. Marriage had given her a strange new dignity and importance that she found extremely pleasurable. It amused her to watch the look that came over people's faces when their eyes alighted on her wedding-ring. She thrilled when someone said, "My dear, that child's actually *married* to that nice young man. . . . Aren't they a charming-looking pair?"

They were, rather, Roberta thought.

3

There was, of course, another side to marriage. . . .

Roberta had summed it up when two days before her wedding she had said suddenly to Allan that, of course, they weren't going to have any children. In no sense whatever had what she had to say about it degenerated into discussion: it remained, first and last, Roberta's personal declaration. Yet the very way in which she had broken in upon the subject had offended something within Allan. It wasn't that he thought such a subject should not be discussed, but only that Roberta hadn't done it; she had simply taken her stand, given him, as it were, an ultimatum. It was as though there, at the outset, she had been defending herself against him. The little spurt with which the words had come out; the deepening of her colour and her averted eyes had given him a feeling of shame; somehow these things had stamped their relationship unmistakably, as a thing not really intimate, not beautiful or delicate. It had no soul. Neither had it created, so far, any soul in Roberta, nor given her a robuster view of life. Still she dabbled about on its edge, untouched by desire or passion, yet slightly afraid that life might, at this juncture, become inconvenient or painful. Certain things in life were still "horrid," and really nice people didn't talk about them. But, at least, Allan realised that between himself and Roberta there was nothing whatever of that sense of comradeship which your modern lovers demand and with which Guen and Antony had scaled the heights. You couldn't see them together without knowing they had done that; but Guen and Antony, so Allan thought, were exceptions. The average marriage wasn't in the

least like that: was a good deal more like this queer union of his with Roberta. Here, just a week after marriage, he was very far from seeing love as Guen and Antony saw it. To him love, on the one side, was a disturbing physical condition; on the other, a deep-rooted sense of protectorship, a desire less to possess than to be possessed; a craving of the blood and the spirit, unsatisfied, perhaps unsatisfiable. . . .

Unsatisfied he certainly was, and with a feverish longing for something with which he seemed never to come within hailing distance. That declaration of Roberta's had not prepared him, somehow, for the coldness he had discovered beneath the warm, vital look of her. Neither—though he had not assumed that her feeling for him reached anything like the degree of intensity of his for her—had he guessed at the frigid voluptuousness of her nature, which confronted him now at every turn. Yet though in a sense he suffered by this cold reserve she brought to marriage, in another it comforted him. It slew for him those old hideous doubts which it disturbed him now to find he had never altogether succeeded in driving out of some corner of his brain, and it confirmed that pathetic tearful statement of Roberta's that she was not "that sort." He did not realise (any more than she) that her virtue was merely indifference; man-like, he thought she was still unroused: thought, even, that he could rouse her. He believed there were things—deep things and profound—which were there to be awakened. He saw her soul as a still water, running deep, not realising that it was an artificial lake in a prettily laid-out park. He assumed still that somewhere slept the maternal instinct he believed to be in every woman, and his faith in it and in its power was very nearly pathetic. Only he kept it to himself. Roberta's opinion of him during those first two weeks soared unexpectedly. She found him kind, good-tempered and considerate. She wrote to Tommy Carew that he wasn't in the very least "horrid" or "beastly," and quite saw her point about the children.

He did, of course, for at this stage he simply could not imagine Roberta as the mother of his children. He saw her as herself a child—wilful, ignorant and ill trained; but he saw, too, that it was Roberta he wanted: nothing and no one else. And Roberta—he felt it in his bones!—was going to be a sufficient responsibility.



INTRUSION

135

But for all that he took with him, when presently the holiday came to an end, a vague sense of disappointment and a muddled conviction that a honeymoon was a greatly overrated affair. Once again, it seemed, life in its essence had managed, somehow, to slip through his fingers.

CHAPTER TWO

1

THE little house which the adventurer abroad had vacated in Allan and Roberta's interest was distant not more than half an hour from Adelaide Lodge and rather less from Roberta's old home in Manningtree Avenue. That, at the beginning, seemed to be the only drawback which Roberta had to urge against it, and then but faintly, because the inconveniences attaching to the keeping of two sets of relatives round the corner were not unduly pressing there in the middle of September, with both sets obligingly taking late holidays.

At first the idea of living in Number Sixteen Meldon Avenue had sent Roberta into transports of delight that were quashed not at all by Allan's disapproval of white paint for a front door and his doubts of her capacity to wrestle with the brass fittings which adorned it. But on his initiative the door, during the fortnight in Shanklin, had suffered a sea change. It had been painted dark green, and the fittings were brass no longer, but black, a scheme which Allan had intended to make general throughout the house, until he saw the bill, which dashed his enthusiasm so considerably that Roberta had been allowed to keep her beloved white paint. A little later she loved it a good deal less. "It would be all right," she said, when this stage had been reached, "if we only had a servant." That was Allan's whole case, he said. The people who built houses that size had no right to go on the principle of servants. "You'll have to get Mrs. Noakes to look after it," he told her.

Mrs. Noakes was the charwoman. She came once a week to "turn out." But Mrs. Noakes no more than Roberta cared for the cleaning of white paint. Between them it suffered dismally.

For Roberta's transports of delight over Number Sixteen Meldon Avenue were early and considerably modified. There were other things, it transpired, which she disliked quite as

much as the cleaning of white paint. "Messing about in a kitchen" was one of them, and sweeping and dusting were others. Also she was appalled at the rate with which stockings and underclothing wore themselves into holes. Roberta hated sewing: it irked her unspeakably, and she had no "method." It was Allan (roused to action by the desperate plight of his shirts and socks) who hit at length upon sorting their defaulting belongings into two neat piles which he identified to Roberta as the "Must be Dones" and the "May be Lefts." The chief characteristic of the "Must be Dones" proved, however, to be a decided tendency to find their way into the "May be Lefts," but Roberta (perhaps also roused to some sort of action by the desperate plight of her own belongings) at least made some effort to suppress it. Things there did begin to improve.

But, taken altogether, this business of housework and cooking and mending certainly took the fine edge off the romance of that smart hotel on Keats Green at Shanklin. These things of the kitchen spoiled her hands and made life commonplace. Besides, it seemed so outrageous that she, Roberta, who had sat in all attitudes and in nearly all costumes or (almost) no costume at all for her portrait, and had written down appointments in a book and been charming to people who made them, should have to descend to work of this menial description. She was bitterly disappointed that Allan's income would not run to a servant, and was of the opinion that insurance clerks were shamefully underpaid.

Allan agreed with her.

So did Miss Tommy Carew, who was lazy and worked as little as she could, and whom Roberta's mother credited with having discovered a means of livelihood which had nothing whatever to do with work—on the cinema, or elsewhere. But Roberta's mother—so Roberta said—had a really nasty mind. Miss Carew these days, however, certainly had a good deal of time on her hands, judging by the amount she was able to spend in a polite paraphrase of her conviction that Roberta, with *her* advantages, ought to have done better for herself. She said this in a surprising number of ways, sitting in her elegant clothes in the little drawing-room of Number Sixteen, of which Roberta was very proud. The drawing-room furniture was John Suffield's wedding present to Allan and Roberta and, Allan said, "looked" like him. There was no nonsense about

it. It was solid and good, and was regarded by Allan as a really admirable collection of the things he hated most in the furnishing line. But Roberta had no fault to find with the room save that it had no pictures—unless you counted (as Roberta certainly didn't) the two things by that young man Linton, who had died in prison as a C.O. Allan, so he said, couldn't afford the pictures he wanted and wouldn't afford the others. Tommy agreed that the drawing-room was rather "nice" and was negative about the pictures, preferring photographs—of herself.

"I can't see, my dear," she said to Roberta, "why you were in such a hurry to give up your job with Roydon. Especially as you aren't going to have a little family. But perhaps Mr. Allan objects to his wife earning some money of her own?"

Roberta didn't know. That point with Allan had never arisen. She had left the office because she was tired of it: because she thought she was worth "something better than an office." She had never intended to go there after her marriage, but she had meant to go on with her sittings for Roydon. Allan, however, had objected, and there, for the present, the matter had come to rest. But listening to what Tommy was saying about Woman's economic independence, she sensed battle. Also she thought how clever Tommy was and how well she talked, for this afternoon Miss Carew warmed to her subject. She knew a great number of arguments against the economic dependence of women; mostly the wrong ones, but as Roberta did not know this she went on pouring out tea and thinking how clever Tommy was and how beautiful—and lucky. If she hadn't won that newspaper competition prize nobody would have known how clever a cinema actress she was. And Roberta remembered that she had wept because her mother wouldn't let her enter for the competition. So nobody would ever know whether she was any good on the pictures or not. Besides, on the pictures you earned a good deal of money; you only worked when you chose, and did not need to spoil your hands with the cooking of dinners and washing up.

But presently Miss Carew went off to Paris; the holiday-makers in Devon and Cornwall came home, and suddenly the weather turned cold and a new domestic terror was added to Roberta's life in the shape of a fire, which became a necessary adjunct to breakfast.

Roberta's capacities, however, seemed to stop short of the creation of a fire. For three mornings she struggled with the task, for three mornings in succession Allan signed the late book at the office, and on the fourth Roberta was led, weeping, from the cold fire-place to lay breakfast in the kitchen, which could be warmed by the gas oven, whilst Allan struggled with the collection of sticks and paper and knobs of coal which Roberta had failed to convert into a fire.

His success, so Roberta thought, was unearthly; also it established a precedent, for throughout the winter Allan continued to rise a quarter of an hour earlier and there was a fire each morning in time for breakfast.

But, even with Roberta's shortcomings over fires and meals and a needle and thread, the first few weeks of her life at Number Sixteen with Allan were devoid of dissension. Their first quarrel, when it came, was over something that was much more serious, at the moment, than Roberta's dislike of housework and her deficiencies as a housekeeper. It was over *The Miscellany*, and the hopes Allan had entertained of joining its permanent staff.

2

Allan had dined that evening with Gore in town and had reached home at half-past nine with concrete proposals concerning which he was inclined to be enthusiastic. Over Roberta's badly-made coffee and a cigar of Gore's he began to discuss them, but from them Roberta learned nothing beyond the fact that Allan was proposing to leave the Comet and that his salary would be decreased by some twenty pounds per annum.

"Well, I like that," she said. "How do you think I'm going to manage on less than I do now? It's hard enough as it is. Besides, if you stop at the office you'll be getting another rise at the end of the year, and it's only three months to that."

Allan, admitting this, found that Roberta had her head screwed on very much in the right way. She got to the heart of his financial position so quickly, in fact, that he was taken unawares, defenceless. There seemed no arguments against what she said: though he was sure there should have been if

he could only have thought of them. The Comet, according to Roberta, was a "safe" job, and "safe," she gathered, was about the last word to apply to this new venture of Antony Gore's. "Who wants to read a dull thing about books and poems and the people who write them?" she asked. "Of course it won't pay. And then where are you, I'd like to know? And me, too, for that matter?"

Still the arguments that Allan was certain were there eluded him. He could think of nothing to say except, a trifle feebly, that if the paper did fail (and Roberta was wrong in being so confident that it would) Gore would be pretty certain to find him something else to do, and doubtless, too, he could go back to the Comet. Anyway, there was no real anxiety on that score, if that was all.

But it wasn't. Roberta made that very clear. It was not only a question of the difference of twenty pounds a year: there was the fact that the Comet now paid his income-tax—a thing, Allan agreed, unheard of in Fleet Street. Also there were his bonuses. Most certainly it wasn't only the loss of twenty pounds a year and safety. There was a good deal more in it than that. Allan, Roberta said, must be mad.

It is difficult to prove that you are not when there are so many arguments all ready to give you the lie. Allan's attempts went for nothing. Roberta would not admit that, once established on the staff of *The Miscellany*, many opportunities would come to him for making up deficiencies in income. She had no interest whatever in Allan as a writer, and no belief. Besides, she had heard too many conversations at Adelaide Lodge not to be aware that there was "no money in literature." And "literature," so she had come to understand, was what all these "lit'ry" folk she knew believed themselves to write.

"Can't you see, Bobbie," Allan said to her, "that it's the work I'm fitted for—that it's the only sort of work I care about, that isn't just drudgery? It means a tremendous lot to me, my accepting this offer."

The word "drudgery" was unfortunate. Roberta, suddenly losing her temper, repeated it with scorn.

"Drudgery, indeed! Do you imagine you're the only person who drudges? What do you think *I* do all day? I suppose you imagine I like it—that a little more or less won't make any difference? Thank you. If you wanted a general servant

married, it would have been honest to have said
Roberta dashed out of the room, banging the door after

and an instinct to follow her, but instead he looked at his book and sat there by the fire making no use of reading. It was barely ten; Roberta, he thought, was certain to come down again. But she did not. Disappointed and resistant, he sat on, making through his pretence of reading what excuse he could for her. He could not believe that she had really been attempting to veto his action; it was only that he had failed to make her do so. Recalling the feeling of impotence that had come over him when he had talked to her, he realised afresh how badly he had handled the whole thing. He had had a sense not only of a gulf between them, but of unintelligibility, as though they were speaking different languages; as if right at the first he had been hostile and something inside him had hardened with vague irritation. Even now, sitting by the fire he was too miserable to make up, the scornful voice drifted back to him. It was curiously upsetting. A morbid tenseness took him, in which he sat on the edge of his chair listening for sounds of Roberta's movements above. What was she doing? Had she thrown herself into bed to cry, or merely undressed and got quietly into bed? He tried to understand that she was not coming down again. But when he went back to his chair and forced his mind upon the matter, and though at first his mood surged up between him and the word, he became gradually sensible that his mood was waning. Its fine edge was being worn down by the misery of his disquiet because, upstairs, Roberta was still there. The utter silence began to get on his nerves. He put on his coat, fastened doors and windows and went upstairs. She was in bed, and the moonlight covered her with a soft light. Her face was hidden in her pillow, and her hair crossed it like a tangled skein whose red-gold maze was threaded with silver. To Allan it was as though the very coloured beauty of her hair had never revealed itself: the sight of it stirred him to gentleness, winnowing. He turned away to the window, drew the curtains, undressed in the dark and got into bed.

Roberta did not move. He thought she must be asleep, but when presently he slipped an arm across her he found that she was not. She flung his arm fiercely away from her.

"Don't touch me!" she said. "Don't dare to touch me!"

Something in her voice, in the very vehemence of tone and gesture, roused Allan's resentment anew. He turned his back on her and lay still, fresh anger flooding his heart. He lay there in the dark, resentful, hurt and estranged: and he swore that he'd be damned before he "touched" her again. But sleep would not come to him. When Roberta moved her hair brushed across his face; and sometimes his foot encountered hers in the coolness that lurked at the bottom of the bed; but he gave no sign. Rigid and straight, he lay there at her side, staring at misery. And midnight came.

3

The week that followed (at the end of which he had promised to give Antony Gore his decision) was for Allan a humiliating one. Roberta was difficult, distant and silent. Though devoid of scenes, their hours together yet shuddered with discord: despair alternated in Allan with angry resentment, and both were like grit between his teeth. Night was only a vast blankness in which Roberta withheld herself, shuddering away from his touch when he was not too sore and miserable to offer it. Once when he did she broke into sobbing that was like a knife in his heart, and because he could not bear it the determination seized him to go off to the spare room and sleep there alone. He got out of bed and stood for a second looking down upon her. But he could find nothing to say. He felt stunned and chilled and apprehensive. He wanted to hate her because she fought unfairly, but all the time there was only this sick longing, this hurt, grievous thing in his heart that was shame and desire and bitterness. He bowed his head and went out.

But not to sleep. He was cold and restless, and his brain pounded away behind his eyes like an engine. His feet, stretching themselves down there at the end of the bed, were lonely, missing Roberta's. He could not lie still. Though he closed his eyes and fixed his mind on sleep, sleep would not come. The night was warm, and flinging off the bedclothes, he went

and stood over at the wide-flung window that looked down on to their tiny garden. Little was growing in it save marguerites and a tiny square of grass they called the lawn. The night was soft and gleaming, with a suggestion of rain and low clouds that hid a dwindling moon. Down there in the garden nothing stirred and no wind came. And as Allan stood looking at it a feeling of exhaustion flooded him and a sensation of failure—acute, like a physical pain. He gulped down the scents of the London night, with his brain pounding still against his forehead, hurting him. It seemed to him as he stood there at the window that the best of life swung by at a stride; that never again as long as he lived would he be able to catch up with it.

Presently, when a clock in the house struck one, a sort of despair seized upon him and a sickening sense of the imminence of the morning that had to be met whether he was ready for it or not. And Allan would not be. He felt weak and wretched, and his head ached in this hideous fashion as though his brain strove to push itself out at his temples. "If I could only sleep!" he thought, and imagined he had forgotten Roberta until he remembered that somewhere in the room where she lay was some aspirin that she kept for the headaches she never had. He could not make up his mind to fetch it. It was as if he dared not go into the room, as if he had not the courage.

But presently he did go, opening the door softly, without knocking, so as not to awaken Roberta if she slept. But she was awake, and as he moved round the room he had a sense of her stirring . . . propping herself on her elbow. Through the half-dark he knew that her eyes followed him. "I want some aspirin," he said, opening drawers on the dressing-table and forgetting to shut them again. "Do you know where it is?"

"In the little drawer on the left. You've woke me up."

"I'm sorry," Allan said, pulling open the drawer. He came, with the bottle in his hand, and sat on the edge of the bed.

"They won't do you much good if you don't take them, you know," said Roberta. Out of the half-darkness her voice came soft and caressing, like a south wind. Allan took out a couple of the tablets and put them in his mouth. Roberta watched him.

"You want some water," she said.

"No, I don't," said Allan. He gulped the aspirin down and put his head on Roberta's shoulder.

"That's what I want," he said. "You shouldn't shut me out."

"Shut you out? I didn't. You went of your own accord."

"But you did shut me out. Out of your heart."

"Oh, *that!*"

She held back his encircling arm and seemed to sink away from him. He lifted his head from her shoulder and looked at her. In the soft darkness of the room her hair and face gleamed palely. As she lifted her hands to push back her hair he saw the faint outline of her breasts beneath her thin night-dress, and because he could scarcely bear to look at her he rose and put away the aspirin. As he shut the drawer some little part of him hated her; but all the other was caught and held by the sound of her voice and the glimpse he had had of her a moment before. One set of instincts rose to combat what he was going to say: another urged him forward to the saying of it. Yet as he spoke it was as if his blood leaped back in his veins; he was conscious of a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, and his voice seemed to stand out in the darkness like a thing naked and shamed.

"Bobbie . . . I daresay you're right about A. G.'s offer."

There was a little silence, while the words danced in letters of flame before his eyes and Roberta seemed to consider.

"I think I am, you know, *reely*," she said at length. "Only, you please yourself, of course."

He was conscious of a little inward shrinking—from himself, from her.

"It's a risk," he said presently. "Perhaps . . . now . . . I ought not to take it."

Again she seemed to consider, and again she said at length:

"Well, you please yourself."

This time he did not shrink. He threw back his head, seeming to brace himself for the inevitable.

"I'll write A. G. and say I've decided not to make the plunge," he said.

There was a little silence. All about them was the darkness, shutting them away from things like a drawn curtain, and beyond it the night, heavy with inextinguishable desire.

"Do you mean that?" Roberta asked.

"If it will please you. Will it, Bobbie?"

He came and sat on the bed again, putting out a hand and

drawing her to him by the shoulder. He felt her head nod "yes." Her breast, warm and soft, came against him. He pressed his lips to her neck and held her close.

"Never shut me out again," he said. "Don't keep me outside. . . ."

Roberta released herself and sank back into bed.

"I'm so tired," she said, "and it's late."

Allan bent down and covered her up. His mind was full of the thought that Roberta had won and that she hadn't won fairly. Dividing this thought came another. He began to laugh.

"Joke?" said Roberta.

"I was only thinking," Allan told her, "of something Balzac said."

"What?" asked Roberta, who recognised Balzac as the author of a singularly dull book about an ass's skin.

"That a man in love is like an ape playing the violin."

Roberta laughed. The simile meant nothing to her, but it added to her knowledge of Balzac as a French writer who showed an extraordinary interest in the nastiest of the animals. . . .

"You ought to lie down at once after that aspirin," she admonished Allan, who said, "Yes, I know."

He was aware, too, of another thing that he knew, which was that Roberta would always win, with these tactics, while he continued to want her and was moved—like this—by the sight of her. She glanced up at him now as he hovered there above her, and she smiled.

"Hurry up, old thing!" she said.

CHAPTER THREE

1

A. G. took Allan's decision philosophically. He said that he was probably quite right to play for safety and reflected that Allan was not the only person who saw *The Miscellany* as a crazy venture. For at the moment A.G. was in no position to give guarantees. The thing was certainly a risk; even *Life and Letters* only just paid its way. All the same, Allan's decision not to come in was somehow, he said, a tremendous pity.

He said it, in fact, so frequently that Guen lost patience and scrawled a scrap of the truth down upon the slate she had smudged clean two months ago in Roberta's interest. It irritated her that A.G. should stand there like that talking about Allan "playing for safety"—Allan, with his enormous contempt for money, his hatred of the money standard by which all life was clipped and toed.

"It isn't Allan's decision at all," she snapped, "but Roberta's." Certainly it was defeat—Allan's defeat. She knew that and she sat down to it as, at the end, she had sat down to the fact of his marriage. She folded her hands before it, as before a thing with which, at the moment, she could do nothing; and she smiled, as though she didn't want, either, to attempt to do anything with it. Once again Roberta had caught him on his vulnerable side. Heaven alone knew how long she was going to be able to do that, how long there was going to be a "vulnerable" side. One had to wait, to fold one's hands and keep quiet.

Guen kept quiet—even when her father wrote her his approval of Roberta. For John Suffield made no mistake. He knew whose decision lay behind that letter of refusal. Roberta was an excellent wife: she was making Allan "see sense." He commended her as a shrewd person, who understood, as he did, that there was no money in literature. . . . But beneath

her quiet Guen mentally kicked herself—and Antony—because they'd both said that to John Suffield too often; that there was no money in literature. She saw him suddenly as the devil quoting Scripture for his own—and Roberta's—purpose.

But Roberta's slate, so far as Guen was concerned, was no longer clean. What she had scrawled on it remained and was more deadly than what had been erased. It was a conjecture Guen had rubbed out, a certainty she had now written in.

2

As for Allan himself. . . .

In the days that immediately followed, though he saw well enough how thorough Roberta's victory was, he did not see, in the very least, how very thorough, too, was his defeat; nor that it was a defeat as much mental and moral as it was physical—indicative of his whole relationship with Roberta and hers with him. Herself destitute of passion, Roberta had yet learned how to use Allan's, how to make it serve her own ends. She saw it suddenly as a key that fitted a good many locks—all the locks Roberta cared so far to manipulate.

Looking back, it seemed to Allan that the night when he had definitely turned his back upon the door Antony Gore had held open for him, was the beginning of a period of happiness that never came again. And though it was brief Allan got, later, into the habit of being grateful for it. He used to clench the teeth of his mind upon the thought of it. He had had it. No one could take it away from him.

Afterwards it wasn't easy to remember the things that went to the making of it. Very little reading, certainly, and less writing, because, somehow, he cared less for writing as a hobby now that he had abandoned it as a career. The definite things about it were Martyn's return from Shanklin, his visits to Meldon Avenue and two trips of Roberta's to Bromley, there to take afternoon tea, for all of which things Allan was grateful, because he imagined—quite wrongly—that Roberta must be having a dull time, since Caryl had distinguished herself by spraining her ankle during the week-end at Workingham which was to have wound up her holiday, and without Caryl Roberta did not show over-much anxiety to present herself at Adelaide Lodge. Miss Carew, Allan was aware, was still

in Paris. He had not met Tommy, and, despite Roberta's mother, was endeavouring to keep an open mind about the lady, whom Roberta said she "missed." These things, he thought, must leave Roberta very much alone.

They did, of course, but to nothing like the extent that Allan imagined, who was not aware of the afternoons she spent with Martyn at some place he knew where tea was made an excuse for dancing. Roberta loved dancing and so did Martyn: but it was Roberta who suggested that these afternoons should be conducted *sub rosa*.

"Good lord, why?" Martyn asked. "Why shouldn't he know? There's nothing in it. Allan's not that sort of ass."

"All right," said Roberta, "but let us know where we are. What about *your* people? How do you explain your absence from the office?"

Martyn flushed.

"That's rather different, isn't it?" he asked.

"How?" queried an innocent-eyed Roberta.

"I mean . . . you see. . . . Oh, hang it all, my dear girl, I'm supposed to be at work. Until I definitely chuck it I've got to let the guv'nor down lightly. He'd kick up an awful dust if he thought I took days off like this. He'd think the business was going to the dogs, whereas the truth is that it's much more likely to do that if I don't take days off."

"I see," said Roberta, "then we'd better make this our last day. We can't play half-and-half like this."

So in the end it was *sub rosa* for Allan as well—just as Roberta had meant it should be. Allan was so old-fashioned.

Martyn, despite an occasional inward twinge, did certainly find these afternoons with Roberta a welcome relief to the uncongenial business of being a junior partner in the concern which bore the family name and which took him daily—or should have taken him—to that dull maze of streets and traffic which Londoners call the Borough. Commerce attracted Martyn no more than it attracted Allan, and all his ambition lay in quite another direction. He had wanted all his life to go prospecting, or to join some Expedition bound for the Unknown, and his sojournings in Mesopotamia had done nothing to reconcile him to this life of the desk. Some day when it meant less to his father he meant to break away. Roberta laughed when he said this sort of thing to her: she couldn't

see, she said, what he had to grumble at. To Roberta his prospects were rosy enough, for the fortunes of the Thorps were founded upon a substratum of custard powder. It was Martyn's grandfather who had discovered the quite supererogatory nature of the hen, and had proceeded to put the creature in her place by the building of a custard factory and the establishment of Thorp's Custard Powder Co., Ltd., which had paid a large dividend at the end of its first year's working and placarded England with pictures of rosy children who hugged large bowls of custard and made rude remarks to interested-looking hens. To Martyn, who preferred real eggs in his custard, who loved dancing, appreciated pretty girls and was not at all inflammable, some such outlet as this which now offered was not only necessary but inevitable, although he had no hope whatever of getting his father to acknowledge it. Seen in prospective these afternoons had made custard just remotely possible; even when he was engaged in covering his tracks they went on being attractive for some time—until, in fact, he was discovered. There was a certain woman who had met Roberta in Mrs. Thorp's drawing-room at Bromley, who knew Martyn very well by sight and who had a daughter. The daughter, like Martyn and Roberta, was a dancing enthusiast; her mother was not, but she had old-fashioned ideas about the newfangled dances and insisted upon coming to eat the tea for which her daughter's men-friends paid and never had time. "Making a damned nuisance of herself" the men-friends called it—an extensive rôle which reached out to embrace Martyn and Roberta. Really, two afternoons in one week. . . . It was her duty to speak. She spoke.

What followed was altogether too painful, and from it Martyn emerged crumpled and soiled in his self-esteem and—incredibly surprised. Not because he had been found out: sooner or later, and as far as his father was concerned, he had expected that; but because something had happened which in no way at all had he expected, either late or soon. It wasn't only that his father had made a fuss, that his mother had said harsh things of Roberta. He would have got over all that. What he could not get over were the things within himself which had arisen suddenly and confronted him. He saw them first when, done with custard for ever, he had stalked out of the house to send a cablegram accepting some wild-cat opening

(his father's term for it) which had offered itself a week ago and which he had never seriously contemplated accepting. With the message written and staring up at him he had seen in one moment of devastating vision what its dispatch would mean. Not only the end of custard, but the end, for him, of Roberta. The realisation ought not to have hurt: he ought to have minded scarcely at all, but he *did*. He minded horribly. It was that which surprised him, for it was not in the bond. There Roberta had been written down plainly as Recreation; Something Nice to Look At. She had no right to appear suddenly, as she did, as a Complication.

Truth to tell, Martyn was not used to complications of this sort, and tearing up his message he went home to work this one out. It was not, he found, very easy, though he did not come to this adventure of love as Allan had come to it. Roberta was by no means the only girl Martyn had looked at, though he had looked at her to some purpose, seeing from the first a good deal more of the real Roberta than Allan ever had and probably ever would. And, too, there was Allan himself. . . .

The thing was inexplicable. . . . Nothing like it had ever happened to Martyn before. He had fallen in love and he had fallen out again, and he had always known that these things were about to happen. But falling in love with another man's wife was against Martyn's code. Freedom on both sides had belonged to all Martyn's love-affairs, that had gone, as yet, so little deeply. One was attracted; one was attracted no longer. The flame burned up and burned down, and no one was any the worse. Candles in the wind, all of us, with our little lives, our little loves. . . . So Martyn reasoned, who did not look for permanence in human emotions and was not attracted to marriage which so obviously does. In love he was an experimentalist, with the right of choice in his own hands. That, in this instance, was the devil of it. He had not chosen to fall in love with Roberta. She was Allan's wife, for one thing, and for another, he had never imagined there was enough of her to fall in love with. Yet somehow he had done it. He knew, of course, that it wouldn't last. It wasn't Roberta who would inspire a lifelong passion—if such a thing were possible—in any man. Why, on a really clear day, you could see right through her. . . . She was empty, a mere beautiful shell. . . . No affair that he or any other man had with her would last.

It couldn't. It was like being in love with a shadow. Properly, of course, she simply didn't exist. When he found that out God help the man who had married her.

Yet but for Allan—the man who had—Martyn was well enough aware that he would have drifted into an "affair" with Roberta—at least as far as Roberta would have allowed him, which was probably a good deal less far than he imagined. Anyway, it would have been very pleasant while it lasted. Martyn, looking his proposition straight in the eye, worked out the answer at six months. He'd be very tired in six months, he thought; six months would certainly exhaust Roberta—and her attraction for him.

Martyn, making these precise calculations, never doubted their accuracy nor what they implied. Six months wasn't good enough. He wasn't going to play the cad for stakes as short as that. And Roberta wasn't worth it. He saw far enough to see that. So he went out the next morning and sent his cablegram; and in the afternoon he went down to Meldon Avenue to see Roberta.

Roberta was delighted to see him and gave him tea, which he allowed to get cold while he crumbled his bread-and-butter in his saucer and either talked at random or didn't talk at all. Neither, so far, had he complimented Roberta on her appearance, which was probably why she asked him presently what was wrong.

"You do seem funny," she said.

"Funny," he thought, expressed it. He would never have believed that he could feel like this about a thing which he had reasoned out so carefully. A profound gratitude seized upon him that he had sent the cablegram that morning. This afternoon would have been too late.

"What's up?" Roberta repeated.

"Nothing much," he said, putting down his cup and saucer and suddenly horribly aware of the hideous mess he had made of it, "only—I've a surprise for you. I'm off on Friday to the Rockies."

With a ridiculous assumption of sang-froid he came and stood with his back to the fire-place. A score of emotions were tear-

ing at him, yet he was conscious of nothing as he lit his cigarette but a desire to tell Roberta not to stare at him so. Frankly, she was incapable, just then, of doing anything else: he had taken her so completely unawares that she had not had time to adopt her air of histrionics. It was the natural Roberta who stared and who said, "The Rockies?" in a thin, astonished interrogative, as though she had never heard of them before.

"Yes, they're mountains in North America. Perhaps geography wasn't your strong point at school!"

Roberta began to recover.

"Is it a joke?" she enquired.

"Far from it, I imagine," Martyn told her.

"But it's absurd," Roberta insisted. "You can't possibly mean that you're leaving England on Friday—why, that's the day after to-morrow."

"That's it," said Martyn. The cigarette, he found, was helpful.

"But it's absurd," said Roberta again.

"It is, rather," Martyn agreed. "But most things are, you know, when you come to think of it. Only this one's true—which most things aren't. I'm off on Friday."

"But, Martyn, *why*?"

"Fed up."

"With me?"

"Oh, rot! Of course not with you—with things generally."

"Which includes me. You don't want to come out with me any more. Is that it?"

"You know it isn't."

"But you don't—any longer—care so much about it?"

"You know I'd rather come out with you than with anybody."

Roberta smiled.

"Well, then?" she said.

Martyn said nothing. He was only overwhelmingly grateful that he'd had the sense to send off that cablegram before he came.

"Martyn, don't be silly. We aren't doing any harm, and it isn't as though I'd go out with you if Allan were free. I wouldn't, of course. It wouldn't be right."

Martyn winced.

"Of course not," he said.

"Well, then," said Roberta again. "Be nice again, Martyn."
"I can't," he said. "At least, I won't. That's done, finished with."

"I see," said Roberta. "Someone's found us out and told."
He explained.

"There was a row," he said, "and I'm clearing out."

"Just because of that? How absolutely silly, Martyn."

"It isn't just because of that. It's only hurried things up."

"I haven't the least idea what you mean," Roberta told him.

"Haven't you?"

"Well, how should I?"

"You mean to say it's never occurred to you that I'm getting rather too fond of you?"

"My dear Martyn, why should it?"

"Because it happens to be true."

"Don't be silly," said Roberta. "Why do you want to go and spoil things?"

"That's what I'm trying not to do. That's why I'm going. You see. . . I like Allan too well to spoil things for him. . ."

"But you don't mind spoiling them for me?"

"I shan't do that . . . much."

Roberta got up from her chair and came over to stand in front of him. She was herself again, and mistress of the situation.

"How do you know?" she said.

"I just do . . . that's all. It isn't you that's in danger of losing your head. I can't imagine you'd ever do that."

She smiled her appreciation of that as she put out a hand and caught at a button of his coat.

"Martyn, do shut up talking rot and be nice."

"I'm not talking rot."

"Aren't you?"

He looked down at her twisting the button of his coat.

"Don't do that," he said.

She went on doing it.

"I do think men are silly," she remarked.

"I know," he said, "but I'm going to be less silly than I might quite possibly be if circumstances were different. You see . . . you're married to Allan. Nothing can alter that."

"Well . . . who wants to alter it? Allan's all right."

"I know. Allan's so very much 'all right' that I can't go

on. You may as well have the truth. I'm not a plaster saint. I'd go on, right enough, if it weren't for Allan. . . . D'you know, it's very difficult to explain with you twiddling about like that with my coat. . . ."

"This," said Roberta, still fiddling with the button, "is most frightfully interesting."

"I thought you'd find it so."

"Don't be beastly," said Roberta, "and go on with the explanation."

"There isn't much more of it. Besides, explanations never explain . . . but I think that what I mean is that I'd lose my head . . . over you . . . fairly comfortably and be damned to it if it weren't for Allan. But as it is I shall probably hate you pretty badly later on for having knocked our friendship—mine and Allan's—on the head."

Roberta smiled.

"Really, you know," she said, "you're being awfully funny this afternoon."

"I'm glad I'm amusing."

"But you're rather silly, too. I can't think what you're making all this fuss about. Why, you've never once even attempted to kiss me."

"No, there isn't even that between us. Well, you can score it to my credit."

"I think you're perfectly horrid."

"Don't think that . . . and, I say, do stop twiddling that button. You're making it very difficult for me. . . ."

"Not to go?"

"Not to kiss you."

"Oh, *that!*"

Roberta shrugged her shoulders, stopped twiddling the button and moved a step away from him. But Martyn caught her by the shoulder and pulled her up sharply against him.

"Do you care a tuppenny damn about me, anyhow?" he demanded.

"Of course. . . . I like you very much. . . ."

"I see. You like me very much. And it rather amuses you, doesn't it, to see me making a fool of myself over you?"

"Don't be silly," said Roberta. "And please let me go."

"It's all right. Don't be afraid. I'm not going to kiss you."

She went limp suddenly in his arms.

"Martyn . . . don't go," she said.

His mouth was very near hers.

"Please . . . because I ask you," she said.

She could feel his arms round her like a grip of steel. Her breast, beneath her thin frock, was crushed painfully against his. His breath came hot on her face. She shut her eyes and was still. If he kissed her he would stay. She knew that. . . .

But he didn't kiss her. There at the end something got in his way, came down like a shutter before her passionless eyes and cool red pouting mouth. It was as if her innate frigidity took shape and stood, forbidding, before the fire of his own passion, treading it out. He let go his hold of her and stepped back. He never remembered what he said, there at the last. Neither did Roberta. She only remembered that he collected his hat and stick, shook her by the hand and departed.

It was an anti-climax and Roberta, being chagrined, wanted to cry. But she thought better of it and sat down to ponder the situation. Men, of course, were idiots, fools, for ever spoiling things, making them beastly. The nicest men, so she reflected, were like that: even Jan Suffield, who had been quite the nicest man she had known. They had no morals—except Allan, who was an idealist and had too many and didn't approve of anybody else's. Friendship—as Roberta understood and practised it, a queer thing, stretched to the inclusion of kisses that were mutual and presents that were not—had never been sufficient for the men Roberta had known. Eventually you came always to their impudent assumption that you, too, had no morals. When you asserted them they called you "puritanic" and "old-fashioned," and left you for someone who wasn't, as Jan had left her for that woman at Fulham and goodness knew how many others. Martyn was the first of her acquaintances who had left her not for her scruples but for his own, and thus far he had a certain claim to her regard: but he, too, had "spoilt" things, which was tiresome because life looked now as though it might for a while be dull. Roberta had found Martyn excellent company, and was annoyed that fate, or whatever it was that controlled events, didn't manage better. Chronologically fate was all at sea: things never happened in the right order. This did not mean that Roberta was "in love" (or any rubbish of that

sort) with Martyn Thorp, but only that there would have been distinct advantages in having married Martyn rather than Allan, if only fate had been sensible enough to have reversed the order of their meeting. And now that she would not see him again she was inclined to be sorrowful over the manner of his departure. He ought not to have gone so calmly, carrying his stick and gloves and wishing her good-bye as though they would meet again on the morrow. Looked at romantically it was all wrong. Most of life was. . . .

She cheered up considerably when the five o'clock post brought her a letter from Tommy Carew in Paris, for Tommy wanted to know if Roberta remembered a Mr. Rayne—a Mr. Douglas or "Duggie" Rayne—and hinted that at least Mr. Rayne remembered Roberta. Tommy seemed to have run up against him in Paris and they were returning together at the end of the week. When, wrote Miss Carew, "we must all foregather."

So, as she had shrugged others, Roberta now shrugged Martyn—not merely out of England, but off the map altogether. She had "done" with Martyn.

4

But Allan hadn't.

That same evening after the badly-cooked meal which, with a robust optimism, they both called "dinner," he wondered suddenly what had become of him. "Perhaps he'll look us up this week," he remarked.

Roberta, lighting her cigarette, became suddenly absorbed in the occupation.

"No," she said, "he won't."

"How do you know?" Allan asked.

"He isn't coming here any more at all."

Allan stared at her.

"Oh," he said, "why not?"

"Because he's accepted that job in the Rockies."

Allan continued to stare at her.

"I thought," he said, "that he'd given up all idea of that?"

"Well, anyhow, he sails on Friday," said Roberta, and tossed her burnt-out match into the fire. "That's all I know about it. I suppose he knows his own business best."

"Friday! But that's the day after to-morrow."

"I know. Well, there it is. He's going right enough. He's down this afternoon to tell me."

"Look here," said Allan, "what's up? This is all comically mysterious. Why should he go off suddenly like that without saying a word to anybody about it? He can't go to go off without even saying good-bye. What's up with you?"

"Well," said Roberta, "I suppose I ought to tell you, though it isn't very nice for me, really. You mustn't mind, now. Of course it's all very silly. . . . The fact is Martyn's going off to the Rockies, so he says . . . because of me."

Allan's face was a blank.

"Because of you? What on earth do you mean?"

"I think," said Roberta, "that you might make an effort to be intelligent."

"But upon my word," Allan began, "I really don't see. . . ." Then suddenly he did.

"You mean Martyn's in love with you? Good lord, what?"

"You're not very complimentary," Roberta said.

"Complimentary be damned," said Allan. "Do you mean to tell me that Martyn came here for the purpose of telling me he'd fallen in love with you?"

"No, of course I don't. He came to tell me he was leaving the land and to say good-bye. The other just . . . happened."

"Well, I'm . . . jiggered," said Allan.

"His face became very red, then paled again. His voice when he spoke was quiet."

"What else—'just happened?' " he asked.

"Nothing," said Roberta. "Why should it?"

Allan made no attempt to answer that.

"He's never . . . kissed you?" he asked.

"Of course not."

"Not even this afternoon?"

"Don't be absurd."

"I'm not," Allan told her. "I want to know, that's all."

"Martyn kiss you this afternoon? Yes or no? I shan't go and shoot him. I only want to know. Yes or no, now?"

"Well," said Roberta, "if you really must know, he did

try . . . but of course I wouldn't let him. It wouldn't have been right."

Allan looked at her. "I see," he said. "Thank you for telling me."

The next day Allan tried to ring Martyn up, but without success, and at luncheon time wired him at the office and at Bromley "Can you dine with me to-night?" And Martyn couldn't. His answer came a couple of hours later.

"Extremely sorry, rushed off my feet. Regret unable wish you good-bye."

That was the end. They never met again. In the spring of the following year Martyn was killed on some hunting expedition in the neighbourhood of the Red River Settlement. It was Roberta who saw the account of it in some newspaper and was suitably thrilled. It is possible the thrill might have gone deeper and lasted longer if she had known that a bitter-tongued woman in a Bromley drawing-room ascribed her son's death, not to the wild animals of North America, not even, as did his father, to the bad shooting of his companions, but just to "that girl he met at Shanklin." Behind the wild animals and the mishandled gun she saw everlastingly Roberta, but for whom she believed Martyn would never have encountered either. Martyn's mother, like the girl she hated, was a sentimentalist: neither of them would have been grateful if you had told them that Martyn had forgotten Roberta before he reached the end of his voyage out. But it would have been true.

CHAPTER FOUR

1

LATER, whenever Allan looked back upon this period of his life with Roberta it was always the ruins of his friendship with Martyn Thorp that seemed to top it. Yet at the time of the crash they had certainly done nothing of the sort. Martyn's confession to Roberta (and her version of it to Allan) had acted upon her as a tonic, so that she had thrilled once again to a sense of her own importance. Like a tree in spring she fairly budded with sweetness, as though she strove still to make up to Allan for the thing he had given up. Yet it was impossible not to see that she hated and mistrusted this need of his to write. For all, these days, he did so little of it, the sight of him sitting there so quietly with paper and pencil had sometimes an extraordinary effect upon Roberta and her budding sweetness. Every line he wrote was nothing to her but a form of masculine selfishness, a thing which rendered him *distract* and irritable and left her to do a good many dull things in the kitchen which, but for this writing mood, he would have shared with her. For Allan hated to see her doing things for him; could not bear to think of her growing tired in his service and spoiling her hands. That was how he put it. Actually, of course, it would have taken a good deal more housework than Roberta did to break down the barrier of her vitality and make her tired. Neither were her hands in any danger of being spoiled, because she spent a good deal in their interest at the local chemists and left all the really injurious tasks to Mrs. Noakes, whose hands didn't matter and who had no money to spend on them at the chemist's, anyway.

If he thought about it at all, Allan doubtless believed himself to be happy. Certainly he was absorbed in this self-appointed task of "moulding" Roberta. He believed it could be done—that it was in a sense his job in life; his job to

make the Roberta that was into the Roberta of his dreams, into the Roberta that he saw every time he kissed her. Guen, spending a week-end with them at Meldon Avenue, found the spectacle of Allan's efforts in this direction rather more than she could stand. For it wasn't true: you *couldn't* mould Roberta. But it was true that she had brains—of a sort; she was clever enough to let you think you were moulding her, since things, that way, were easier. During the two days of her visit Guen raged inwardly against her brother's persistent endeavour to save Roberta trouble: was rendered speechless with anger at seeing him frittering his time away over helping her to wash up. Damn it all, why *shouldn't* Roberta wash up? It was her part of the bargain, and it wasn't as though she was ill or wanted to do other things. She didn't. She didn't want to do anything at all except be amused or entertained, or sing the wrong songs in a sweet untrained voice at you. But while Allan washed up Guen remembered that his *Life and Letters* "copy" was always late, and understood why and let it get on her nerves. She went home and swore mildly about it to A.G., who said he thought it very nice of Allan to help his wife wash up, and that it wasn't Roberta's fault his "copy" came late. There were people who were always late with their "copy." Allan, he supposed, was one of them. . . .

So Allan went on being late with it and saving Roberta trouble. At least two evenings a week he took her out to dinner and sometimes to a theatre or cinema afterwards, though not too often, because Roberta didn't care for galleries and pits (which were all Allan could afford) and Allan didn't care for the cinema. He spent, of course, a good deal more money than he should have done, but it pleased him to please Roberta and preserved to him this ecstasy that was his feeling for her and his joy and pride in her beauty, which marriage in a quite definite way had deepened and enriched. Everything about her had been, as it were, toned-up, reinforced; her exquisite colouring, her hair and eyes, her very health and vitality. To it all something—something without a name but very definite for all that—had been added. Even Guen admitted that, always acknowledging Roberta's beauty without ever being in chains to it as was Allan or Caryl. She saw it as the one thing she possessed; her one claim to your—toleration.

But it was Caryl, meeting her for the first time since her marriage, who said that Roberta was a supremely excellent advertisement for matrimony.

2

Caryl had made the occasion of her birthday and her approaching exam. the excuse for ignoring the medical opinion that she ought not to think of getting home for another week. She wrote to her mother that she must come and fetch her—in something, anything, that went on wheels. And when her mother arrived with a private car which looked as though it might prove expensive Mrs. Heston at once made it look superfluous by explaining that Mr. Merrick had been quite willing to drive Caryl back, but that Caryl had refused. She had. Unusual colour in her cheeks and surprising determination in her voice Caryl had refused point-blank. She wasn't going, she said to her mother on the way home, to smash up the week-end like that. No more than that: she wasn't communicative. She only leant back in her corner, twisted her face as though her foot was hurting her and announced in her queer, emphatic way that she was tired of other people's houses, anyway.

On this afternoon Guen and Roberta had come to tea. Guen, whose imagination always stopped short at birthday presents, came desiring to be told what Caryl wanted most (as if people ever knew!) and Roberta, whose imagination stopped short of most things, had this time risen to the occasion with a new photograph of herself in a silver frame—at which Alice sniffed perceptibly, not liking Roberta and seeing in her present only one more thing to be polished. Later, when A.G. and Allan arrived, there was to be a family gathering to dinner. Meantime tea and chatter of presents and holidays and solicitations over Caryl's injured ankle. Guen said very little and not very nice things (as Caryl pointed out) when she did; but then Guen's new book was due in a few days' time, which explained her mood to everybody except Roberta, who merely resented it. Caryl, herself to-day not quite free from nerves, lay on her couch, monopolising Roberta and coming to that cheerful decision about her—that she was a really excellent advertisement for matrimony. And most women weren't. Not

for nothing had Caryl watched the painful metamorphosis of several of her acquaintances who had exchanged a career for a husband and contrived ever afterwards to look as though the change disagreed horribly with them. As though nothing further mattered in life, they had "crumpled up" visibly; had got to themselves babies and nerves and a general indisposition to brush their hair. Not that the crumpled-up wives admitted their condition; they admitted nothing save the babies, who were self-evident. Marriage and motherhood, for them, were the end of all things: contemplating them you saw life as a tunnel, infrequently lighted. You kept coming to lamps and passing lamps. You moved on . . . always leaving things behind . . . always coming to others. . . . School, college . . . love . . . marriage . . . experience . . . motherhood. . . . Not much after that, perhaps, but more motherhood. . . . Was even that as dull as the crumpled-up wives made it seem?

Caryl, passionately fond of children and passionately fond of life, wanted to know. Since it couldn't be motherhood that dulled marriage, was it marriage that dulled motherhood? Was marriage the last lamp in the tunnel?

Here was Roberta, not exactly *saying* no but *looking* it, certainly. She was so evidently not just coming to lamps and passing them. She denied the metaphor of the tunnel altogether in her pretty clothes (that Guen had helped her to choose) and with her sunny looks. Allan's image of a barefoot Roberta, strolling lazily by a summer stream, was much more accurate if you had to have one, even now that she wore that strange little air, that those other women had worn, of knowledge, experience . . . initiation. But she wore it with a difference, a difference so immense, so unmistakable that Caryl positively clanked her chains before it—her chains of gratitude and affection. But certainly Roberta was "different" from those others Caryl had known and remembered. It was as though, giving herself reluctantly, some rag of her virginity remained yet with her, as though it peeped out beneath the matron's cloak she wore so prettily. Roberta didn't *look* married. That, Caryl decided, was the secret of it. Those others had—and so early. Finality was written all over them. But not over Roberta. Roberta had made marriage not the end, but the beginning. . . .

"Of what?" Guen wanted to know when, later, Caryl said

that to her. "Of what?" But, like Pilate, Guen did not wait for an answer. A.G. was shouting from the front door that they would lose their train.

3

"The bill for your motor ride's come in," Pen told Caryl the next morning when she went upstairs to fetch her breakfast tray.

"Is father bearing up?"

"Fairly well. Says it's a bit thick and that he can't for the life of him see why you couldn't have accepted Mr. Merrick's offer and saved the expense."

"Oh, *can't* he? Any elaborations of his state of mind?"

"Not many . . . except that Wokingham to Highgate's no distance, and that if you'd started soon after breakfast the young man could have got back in excellent time for his appointment. . . . Had he *really* got one, Caryl?"

"'Course. He was taking Marjorie over to White Horse Hill for the day. . . . Marjorie suggested it. . . . I happened to overhear. . . . You see, I was tied to the house with this beastly foot. I've been an awful nuisance . . . you always are in other people's houses when things happen to you, and Marjorie can't stand people being ill. She was fed up with me enough, shouldn't wonder, as it was, without my spoiling her day. I had to play the game, anyhow."

"Marjorie's game?"

"And Dick's."

"Oh, it's Dick's, too, is it? Sure of that?"

"No," said Caryl. "I'm not sure of anything."

"My recollection of Marjorie Heston is that from her cradle she's dangled men after her and cut the string quite comfortably when the young man at the end of it became tedious."

"I know . . . still, this may be the real thing. You have to go on that assumption. . . . At least, I do. That's why . . ."

"You choked Master Dick off."

"Why, I wouldn't let him drive me up on Saturday."

"But you did, earlier . . . choke him off?"

"Who said so?"

"Does it matter?"

Caryl shrugged her shoulders.

"I can guess," she said.

"And it's true?"

"Oh, in a way, perhaps. I don't know. You see, I wasn't sure—and I thought Marjorie was. I couldn't keep him hanging about. . . ."

"But surely you knew . . . whether you liked him or not?"

"Oh, *like* . . . what a stupid word! Of course I *like* him. He's what's called 'popular.' That isn't nearly enough. . . . I couldn't keep him hanging about while I studied the situation."

"But why study it?"

"Had to—quite suddenly. Things were what you call precipitated."

"How?"

"Well, Marjorie had a head—and it was raining. We both like rain . . . Dick, I mean, and I . . . so we went out together. We had only one umbrella, and it began to pour when we were in the wood. We stood up under a big tree. . . ."

"And he tried to kiss you? Well?"

"Nothing else—I ran away."

"Heavens!" said Pen.

"Pretty feeble, wasn't it?"

"Feeble!"

"Well, it's some time ago, thank goodness."

"When?"

"Oh . . . months . . . April . . . June, or something like that. I forget."

She didn't: she remembered perfectly. April—somewhere about the middle, too, because the land was dotted with the red and white of fruit trees. . . .

"I see," said Pen. "So you let Marjorie absorb him. . . . Was he absorbed?"

"Not altogether. There seems to be a good deal of him."

"Too much for Marjorie? Or is it only that the victim struggles. Does he struggle, Caryl?"

"Oh, a bit . . . not often, though."

"But in your direction?"

"Perhaps. . . . I don't know. It isn't any good talking about it. . . ."

"But wouldn't it be just as well to make up your mind?"

"About Dick?" Caryl shrugged her shoulders again. "I s'pose so, only—I can't. Oh, look here, Pen, you've been through it: you must know. *How* does one tell—for certain?" Pen laughed.

"You missed your chance," she said, "that day in the wood . . . under the umbrella."

"You mean that if I'd let him kiss me I'd have known?"

"Something like that."

"But supposing I'd only known he was the wrong man?"

"Well, that's it—you'd have *known*."

"But I don't want the wrong man to kiss me. . . ."

"That does complicate matters, rather, but still you've got to begin some time."

"But—with the wrong man!"

"Not necessarily. You might as well look on the bright side."

"Emulate Mr. Bennett, in fact."

"Which Mr. Bennett?" They knew several. Mr. Bennett the milkman, Mr. Bennett four doors away . . . and the man who called for waste-paper. . . .

"Jane Austen's," said Caryl.

Pen laughed and said "Oh!" as if she'd never heard of him—as she probably hadn't.

"It's a horrid risk!" said Caryl. "Dropping kisses about all over the place on the chance of one of 'em alighting presently upon the right person."

"But kissing isn't horrid—except when the man's got 'wrong' written all over him."

"Not for you, perhaps. But, then, you like kissing . . . you're the kissing sort. I'm not. Why, I don't even kiss the family except on special occasions, like a reunion or illness or a birthday."

"I've noticed it," Pen said.

"Pen . . . how many 'wrong' ones before . . . Tom?"

"It's an improper question, but I'd tell you if I could remember."

"Oh—as many as all that!"

"There's baby," said Pen. "I must go. I'll come and help you into your clothes presently. Stay where you are."

Caryl stayed. Flat on her pillows she lay contemplating the ceiling. It wanted white-washing, and there was a little com-

pany of flies (that ought to have died, by now, with the summer) chasing each other in circles just beneath it. Caryl hated flies, but she hated fly-papers and fly-traps even more. So she had to put up with the flies. They were disgusting, she thought—but so were kisses, considered as arbiters of one's matrimonial fate. Arbiter wasn't the word, either: it suggested a decision from which there was no appeal—something that was beyond control. . . . And a kiss wasn't—oughtn't to be, anyway. A kiss could be influenced by many things . . . ever so many things; your own mood, time, place . . . and the fact that you knew the man wanted it; especially if you were a philanthropist, like Pen. Caryl's thoughts journeyed, like the flies, in a circle. There was no end to this sort of thing.

And yet she didn't see how you could take things . . . your first kiss! . . . quite like that. One had standards—standards that made Pen's implications revolting. And not only Pen's. . . . There were girls she knew who went much farther than that; who made experiments that went far beyond a mere kiss; who were quite candid—crude even—about it. They weren't, they said, going to miss things; they weren't going "to tie themselves up" without knowing. Only, Caryl wasn't like them. She had in her a strain of the Puritan that was in Allan: she couldn't bear to spoil things—that way you so easily might. The Experimentalists laughed at her, called her Diana . . . Artemis. But they would have laughed, too, at Pen's suggestion that a kiss could help you, could tell you all that.

Weren't there people who "knew" without—any of these things? Guen and A.G. must have known: they couldn't have had much use—or time—for kisses. . . . Too brainy by half—the marriage of pure intellect. Allan must have known. And Roberta? You couldn't help feeling that Pen was right when she said that no kisses given or returned would be likely to mean much to Roberta. Madeleine remained. "Nothing between us," she had said of herself and Allan, "not even a kiss." Yet Madeleine had known.

And *she* hadn't. That, Caryl knew, was the hard core of her depression—that she had fallen below her own standards. . . . It might or might not be absurd to run from a kiss, but to run because you simply couldn't decide whether you wanted it or

not was certainly more than absurd. It wasn't, she knew, the kiss that she had shrunk from, but herself—and her own uncertainty . . . that horrible, clutching, idiotic fear that he who offered it might be the wrong man, that she couldn't tell whether he was or not. She had, first of all, to be sure.

She wished she didn't keep remembering that day in the Berkshire wood; the dripping trees and undergrowth; herself and Dick beneath one umbrella, arms touching. . . . And presently Dick's face very near hers and curiously eager and certain. Oh, yes, Dick had been certain enough—of himself, of her. And she had pulled herself free and run. . . . She saw herself now pushing his face away, racing through the April woods—Artemis . . . Diana . . . flying instinctively from the first chord of love's overture. . . .

And yet not Artemis, not Diana at all. . . . Perpetual virginity, chosen, not obligatory, was not what she asked of life or desired. She wanted all the things that life had to offer—the smooth with the rough, pain, joy, happiness and unhappiness. Fulfilment, experience. . . . All life to hold in her hands; not to spill or reject a grain of it.

It was not as Artemis she ran. The Experimentalists were wrong. Neither as a coquette, with quick feet and backward beckoning glance. Prude, fool, or Impossible Idealist? Which of these three?

She knew. Impossible Idealist—saving everything for the one man, not wanting to spoil things, to brush off the bloom. How the Experimentalists would laugh!

4

To-day as she thought of these things Caryl's straight mouth hardened into a thin red line of disgust. The Impossible Idealist looked frowning out of her short-lidded, wide-open eyes, seeing Pen and the Experimentalists generally as prodigals, spoiling things, wasting the substance of life. And Caryl could not bear to waste anything at all—not so much as a kiss. . . . Yet if you wouldn't risk spoiling things you took the much bigger risk of missing them altogether. Well, supposing she *had* missed—this, whatever it was? Supposing Dick married Marjorie? One got over that sort of thing—at least, the right sort of girl got over it. One belonged to a generation

that no longer accepted the Byronic *ipse dixit* about love—"that sort" of love. One knew, now, that it wasn't the whole edifice of life, but just one department. Important, no doubt, but still, only one department. There was much more in the world, in life, than love and marriage. You didn't want to miss them, of course, but you very well might since there weren't enough men to go round. . . . And if you *did*—if this department of life never opened to you—nobody was going to make you believe there was nothing else at all worth while. That was the sort of thing men liked to believe—and one sort of woman. But always there was Madeleine giving it the lie—Madeleine, who knew it wasn't what you took out of life, but what you put in that counted; not what you received, but what you gave—of effort and courage and truth.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE process of "moulding" Roberta went on.

Her occasional visits to the Poetry Circle were meant to contribute towards it, but the interest she found in them was of a very different kind from that which Allan imagined. Here in that stuffy room in the Tottenham Court Road she met some of the people Guen used to coax out on rare occasions to the suburbs—among them Constance Maugham and Grace Hardwick. Grace Hardwick, Allan told her, wrote satirical novels and *vers libre*, the one as a relaxation from the other, though he could never remember which way round it was. He also said that she held some position in the Post Office, and that all the other people who did wished that Miss Hardwick did not. She bored Allan because she kept all her brilliant remarks for her novels, and he found it exhausting to try to get some glimpse of the clever novelist through the very dull things she said as a woman. Roberta, too, thought Miss Hardwick dull—though for quite other reasons. But she liked her clothes and understood that she wore furs not because it was cold (it wasn't), but because furs suited her. The sort of woman, she said afterwards to Tommy, who at the fall of the first leaf rushes to take her furs out of cold storage.

Miss Maugham was well dressed, too, in a grey frock made by somebody whose idea of a frock was evidently that it should look as much like a coat as possible. Roberta, taking in its details, decided that she had never really understood before how very trying the colour grey could be. She was, moreover, terribly bored by Constance Maugham, who had told her that poetry had become a fashionable occupation of the moneyed and criticism a thing of cliques and coteries. She seemed quite worried about it.

Besides the Poetry Circle, Roberta thanked heaven (here, ten weeks after her marriage!) there was Caryl. And Caryl, hav-

ing sat for her B.A. Honours degree in October, was, here at the beginning of November, taking a rest. Roberta liked Caryl because, as she said to Allan, she was "jolly" and didn't think her stupid because she didn't like books. The two of them came to see a good deal of each other, and Allan, though not in the least understanding the friendship, bestowed his blessing upon it. But whilst Roberta's friendship with Caryl was one thing, that with Tommy Carew was quite another. Allan regarded Tommy as a doubtful ingredient in this careful moulding process upon which he was embarked, and he had been glad that, despite Tommy's epistolary expression of a wish to "foregather," Roberta had seen nothing of her since her return from France; and then, one evening in early November, from the front row of the pit at the St. James's, Roberta espied her sitting luxuriously in the stalls with Mr. Rayne. Essentially an evening-dress woman, Tommy wore a bright orange frock cut to reveal an alarming expanse of alabaster shoulder. She looked vivid and blatant and alive. Mr. Rayne was neat, smooth and insolently self-possessed. Allan hated the way he stuck his feet straight out beneath the opposite stall and roved an appraising eye over the femininity that surrounded him. But more than all else he hated the taxi-driver whose obduracy landed them into an encounter in the street when the play was done, for Rayne turned away from the squabble and the taxi just in time to cannon heavily into Roberta. There followed mutual apologies, recognitions and Mr. Rayne's statement that Count Tolstoy's play (which he referred to as "the show") had bored him stiff. Roberta, who had also been bored by it, seemed to find Mr. Rayne interesting, and in the subsequent quartette, which walked down Piccadilly and split neatly into twos, it was Roberta who walked with Rayne, while Tommy and Allan brought up the rear. The talk, so far as Allan and Tommy were concerned, harked back to Tolstoy. For Allan the play had been a quite remarkable but unsatisfactory performance, that had revealed to him the immense gulf fixed between the Russian temperament and the English, and the fact that there is, as yet, no bridge wide enough to span it. All the evening it had been this sense of a foreign temperament which had come between Allan and the stage, pulling the fabric of the play into a myriad loose ends which had defied his efforts to gather them up and wind them upon

the skein of understanding. But no such attempts had bothered Tommy Carew, who knew nothing of the Russian novel and had found it a good deal simpler to regard Fedya Protasov as an Englishman. And as an Englishman, of course, Fedya was simply unaccountable. She was slightly baffled by Allan's "We are an egotistic race!" but was not reduced to silence. She loved to hear the sound of her own voice. Allan judged she was one of those incorrigible people who go to the theatre to be amused, and it puzzled him that she should have gone to see *Reparation*. He learned later that she had complimentary tickets and it was evident that she had had her amusement, though it was of an oblique sort. It was all one to Tommy.

At the tube was the usual theatre crowd, and to please Roberta Allan agreed to be taken to the Macéna's café for coffee. "You'll miss the crowd," Tommy said as they went along, "and sometimes the Macéna's is quite good fun. You can make as much row as you like, and if you're looking for copy. . . ."

Allan wasn't. He wasn't looking for anything save some reason why he wanted to push Rayne off into the gutter as Roberta trotted along in her absurd shoes at his side; and why every time his hand touched her arm and every time she smiled at him in that tantalising downward fashion Allan knew so well, a sharp little pain should dart through him and leave him quivering.

The café when they reached it, proved disappointing. It was small and ugly and very full—of smoke and human beings, mostly men, with a sprinkling of women in odd, gaily-coloured clothes, a good many of whom Tommy seemed to know. The noise and heat were intolerable. Everybody talked and smoked and drank coffee or liqueurs or tea out of glasses. Rayne ordered coffees and *crème de menthe* liqueurs, and while they drank them a young man at the next table tried to persuade them to play football with his bowler hat. He was summarily suppressed by Tommy, who picked up his gloves from the floor, stuffed them into his pocket and advised him to go home.

"You're a nice girl," he said.

"I know," said Tommy. "Do go home. You're very drunk. I'll have that game of football to-morrow."

"Riyouah," said the young man and lurched out into the night.

"The Macenas," said Tommy, with a yawn, "is one of those places that never are but always to be—raided by the police. It's damn dull here to-night. Let's hop it."

Allan thought it was dull, too, and as a preliminary to "hopping it" called to the proprietor for a bill. The man worked a complicated sum on the corner of the table and announced "Twelve zheelings and zixpence, if you please."

"His arithmetic's as queer as Sir Auckland Geddes'," Tommy said; but no one disputed Allan's right to be the victim of it.

"We must meet again," Mr. Rayne said affably when they got outside. "Your wife and I are quite old friends, Mr. Suffield." And again Allan thought how really nice it would be to knock Mr. Rayne off the pavement into the gutter!

"We foregather every Thursday," Tommy told him. "Why not look us up? Bobbie knows the address."

Allan murmured excuses which Tommy seemed not to hear.

"Any old time," she said, "always delighted, I'm sure."

Allan and Roberta caught the last tube, but the bus upon which they had been relying at the other end was gone, and they had to walk. They were very tired, but Roberta said she'd had a jolly evening and that it was worth it. Allan began to say that he was afraid they were incurring extravagant habits: he thought they'd have to begin retrenching.

"Oh, what a shame!" Roberta said. "It's been so nice."

"Well, we won't talk of it now," Allan said. "The night's too good. Isn't it perfectly wonderful, Bobbie? You'd never dream it was November."

They walked on, arm in arm, silently, the early November night wrapping them round. After the hot café the air on their faces was like a cool hand stretched out in the darkness, and over the tree-tops the stars hung like a crown of silver. The moon, very pale and young, swam in a sea of sapphire.

That walk after midnight through the quiet streets of a North London suburb passed steadfastly into Allan's memory. It stood clear. Etched in lines of black and silver it remained, undimmed of time and change. And with it was treasured up the vision of Roberta's face and the sound of her pretty voice that never said anything that mattered, that said to-night that its owner had had such a jolly evening. . . . Always it seemed as though the night had taken her beauty and folded it closely in the mesh of its own, so that the loveliness of the stars belonged to it and the quiet of the sleeping earth. . . .

CHAPTER SIX

1

TWO days later the morning post brought a confirmation of Tommy's invitation and an invitation of another sort from Hilmer Roydon. He wanted, so he said, some special photographs for an exhibition, and he begged Roberta to give him a sitting. For reasons of her own Roberta said nothing of this to Allan, hiding its arrival under that of Tommy's. And Tommy's invitation Allan persuaded her to forego.

"There's no point, darling, in knowing that crowd of hangers-on. And they'll make you discontented and dissatisfied. I don't want you made either."

Roberta wrote pleading a prior engagement, but she was inclined to repent her acquiescence in what she called Allan's "prejudices" when she found that he had come home that evening to write. She, for her part, dragged a heap of mending from a cupboard and sorted it listlessly into its two piles of "Must Be Dones" and "May Be Lefts." The "Must Be Dones" were appallingly numerous and she went at them viciously, occasionally relieving her feelings by throwing a badly afflicted sock or stocking on to the fire. "It's no good, I simply can't mend that . . . it's more hole than sock," she'd say when with a questioning look Allan glanced up from his work and wrinkled his nose at the smell of burning. At ten o'clock she gave it up and retired to bed, where, an hour later, Allan discovered her in tears and temper. It wasn't easy to pacify her nor to get at the root of her complaint. But he gathered she'd been dull and felt neglected.

"But, darling, we've been out so much . . . four evenings practically out of every six. . . . And I did want to work to-night."

... had been asked to work late.
torrent of resentment during the
in a whirlpool of self-pity by
She complained that she hated

"How long is this late work go
"Until Christmas," Allan told
I needn't have accepted. I did
shall be very glad of the money.
of late."

"Oh, dear, I hate all this about

"So do I. I've always hated it
We must *have* money, unfortunat
plunge . . . go away into the cour
our luck. A.G. could get me a ge
I haven't time for much now. An
cheaply in the country. I'm game i

But Roberta wasn't. She dismi
in three words.

"Don't be silly!" she said. "D
this late work?"

Allan bumped back to earth. "
bending his head before this strong

"And what happens to me?" said

"Nice things, I hope." He out
ners at Adelaide

With Hilmer Roydon."

But I thought you hated the studio? You were quite glad to have it."

"I know . . . but I thought we'd be better off . . . I don't want to go back in the old way. Only just for occasional occasions."

"For the tubes?"

"No, not always. There are exhibitions . . . things like that."

"Darling, I'd so much rather you didn't."

But it would only be occasionally, and the money'd be so useful."

"We're not so hard up as all that."

"I am. I haven't a sixpence of my own."

But my dear girl, you can have what you want, within reason. It isn't *my* money, but *ours*."

Roberta settled herself in bed and turned her back on the window and on Allan.

"I think that's a perfectly silly thing to say," she remarked. And there the subject ended. But Roberta's decision was final. The next morning she sent Roydon a reply in the same tentative, making an appointment for Thursday of that week. Later Tommy turned up unexpectedly to tea and agreed with Roberta that if people wouldn't let you be honest you had to deceive them. Anything, anyway, for a quiet life.

Thursday's my 'do,'" she said. "You'd better make a day of it and come on to lunch when Roydon's finished with you. I don't be surprised if you find Duggie there. . . ."

Duggie was there and looking very much at home, his feet on the mantelpiece and a whisky-and-soda at his side. He greeted Roberta with affability and paid her neatly-turned compliments while Tommy dug out a fragmentary lunch from unexpected places and planked it down in places even more unexpected.

Roberta saw, she could not help seeing, that Mr. Rayne's interest rested upon her appreciatively. But Roberta was used to that. What she did not see was that his eyes, insolently steady, stared her of clothing, left her naked to his cold, appraising gaze. She judged him by what he said, and that was correct and casual enough.

"Do much of this sort of work?"

you Bobbie. Ethel May said I m

"But I didn't say you might c
observed. "Here, hike over the c
Duggie "hiked" it over.

"I wonder," he said to Robert
couple of photographs one day? I
I might be able to get you a o
boxes . . . if you care about that
likes variety and he'd consider any
you'll come along and see my s
pretty, isn't it, Ethel May? You
a sop to Mrs. Grundy and A Possi

And when Roberta hesitated Tor
bie. Keep him in his place. Don't
to jump. . . . Here, have another tor
sitting on the butter, Dug, I'd like s

Mr. Rayne handed over the butt
not adhering to his trousers, as
Roberta's direction.

"Ever thought of going on the p

"Well . . . not lately," Roberta co

"Shouldn't if I were you," Tom
devil. Never think. My motto."

"We're aware of it ~~don't want~~

"So it is," said Tommy. "You try it and see. And I wish you'd go out for a little while. I want to have a feminine jaw. Can't you see it in my eye?"

"Can I go and sponge your butter off my trousers first?"

"Water's no good. There's some benzine in the kitchen. It has a nasty temper. It evaporates if you leave the cork out, and if you get it near the gas it's you who'll evaporate."

Mr. Rayne was some time over the benzine and his trousers, but eventually he went and Tommy and Roberta had things to themselves. The "feminine jaw" was fairly comprehensive, and when at the end of it Tommy suggested that Roberta might like to wash, the moralist might have thought that it was not alone Roberta's hands which needed to be washed. . . . Yet it was not what Tommy said so much as what she implied; her cynical attitude to life; her cold, calm sensualism, her "pricing" of everything on earth, her denial of the godhead in humanity. Her tongue left neither Galahad clean nor Lancelot brave. . . .

"You know where the bath-room is?" she said.

Roberta did, and went to it. Tommy, too, got up and went into her bedroom, which might have been tidier. She pushed up a window, removed Mr. Rayne's pipe from her dressing-table, shut up odds and ends in a drawer, threw Mr. Rayne's slippers into the wardrobe and camouflaged his silk pyjamas with the eiderdown quilt. These things done she stood for a moment looking round. "All serene," she reflected; nothing remained in evidence calculated to bring a blush to the cheek of the young person.

"Right-o!" she called to the particular young person who was asking on the other side of the door if she might come in. She came in, took the pins out of her hair and said she didn't agree with all Tommy had been saying. She thought the world was perfectly disgusting.

"You can't speak to a man without his imagining things," she complained.

"I know," said Tommy, "but they're right, you know, nine times out of ten. All women aren't lumps of ice, like you. They do really want the things you call horrid, my girl—the plain, blunt, physical act called marriage, that hasn't got anything whatever to do with orange blossom and white satin and a ceremony in some church. A man, not a husband. . . . Sorry

"No, duckie, but it appeals to
ber that. Let's trot back, shall

They trotted back and pursued
marriages and husbands until M
bottles in brown paper, a prom
"sent round," and a demand for

Tommy's guests proved to be
invertebrates, for whom life was
one Soho restaurant to another, w
something they referred to as "wor
seem too fond. They viewed the
haze of tobacco smoke, squinted at
glass. . . . They had a profound
lived in neat houses, paid their b
Some of the men had been in th
done little for them beyond colourin
they hated the war because of it
because it had "spoiled" the Café
cement than love, and it was the
held them together. They all hat
same things, and through all their
Art and "movements" and the se
and their friends, that fact emerge

They had, between them, pler
could, in their way, be entertain
had point and wit: their ~~comme~~
virtue of ~~virtue~~

He wasn't going to be any gentleman's sanguinary bride, you very much . . . too damn monotonous. Roberta, a respectably married woman, was beginning to feel comfortable, was grateful to a frowsy individual in check who at this point interrupted the disquisition on the lies by taking a poem from his pocket and beginning to read aloud. There was a good deal of it and it concerned a man with yellow and with orange hair who had danced on an emerald lawn while the sun went down in the sky like a rotting peach, and who eventually had her brains clubbed out by a proud gentleman with a clipped black moustache, mobile eyes and deliberate chin, who appeared to object to the poet's morals. The audience, who didn't, showed signs of interest when it became apparent that the poet desired to continue the poem about the gentleman who did.

"The poem, once," Tommy told him, "is all right. The second poem, twice, is a blasted nuisance. Besides, your lemon-scented young girl can't stand having her brains clubbed out twice the same evening, and the gentleman with the moustaches doesn't seem to be encouraged to make a habit of it. Now go and sit in the corner and keep quiet."

At that end they gave him some wine and the girl in the blue frock and got back to the things that mattered. Later she turned up the gramophone and there was dancing. Dancing was emphatically one of the things that "mattered"—which was probably why the good dancers went about it with the same faces of mutes at a funeral and frowned at the bad dancers who kicked their heels about and seemed to be enjoying themselves.

Roberta danced all the time with Duggie Rayne—in a sort of uneasy silence. With her firm young body pressed close to his, speech for Mr. Rayne was certainly supererogatory: conversations for dancing were hardly conversational. But at last, when, like any Cinderella, Roberta flew from the dance, he whispered, "You dance divinely, little girl. Again."

She did. She went twice and then Allan found out, for like Cinderella, she failed one evening to leave quite

thought of some explanation a
frock. There was nothing for
thought, took it well. He was

"Is this the first time?" he asked.

"No," said Roberta, who had
hung for a sheep as for a lamb,

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought you'd say I wasn't
wouldn't like it."

"I don't, but still less do I
back."

Roberta's red mouth pouted, but

"Are there many of them, Roberta?"

"Many of what?"

"These things you don't tell me."

"No . . . not many."

"What others?"

"I can't think of any . . ."

"Roberta! Do let us be honest about
couldn't you have been honest about it?"

"I would have, only I do hate to
made a fuss. You're like mother."

"But don't you see that even a
than deception? It's awful for
not to trust each other."

"I *do* trust you, Allan."

"We don't have to."

but we do have a good deal more than many people—and it isn't money that makes you happy."

"But not having it makes you *unhappy*," said Roberta.

"Rubbish! You're not unhappy, are you?"

"I'm a bit lonely. . . ."

"Still? Look here, shall I cancel this evening work? I can, now, if I like. . . . Otherwise, it's going on till Christmas. It's for you to say."

"I wouldn't like you to do that," Roberta said. "I shall be all right. Caryl was talking about a dance the other night . . . and, oh, I daresay I'll get used to it. . . . Of course, if you're going to make me promise not to go to Tommy's . . ."

"I'm not," said Allan. "I don't issue orders. Only . . . be careful . . . and I shouldn't, if I were you, go too often. Aren't you reading anything?"

"Yes, there's that Conrad you lent me."

"Don't you like it?"

"Oh, yes—but it's so tiring. I can't follow it."

Roberta did not find it easy to read Conrad. She had come up rather too sharply against Marlow, the super-narrator of the earlier Conrad—of *Lord Jim* and of *Youth*, and had stumbled badly over *Chance*. Even Allan had admitted that only Conrad could have got that story out through the twisting maze of the method he had there adopted.

The conversation slipped down the by-path of Roberta's reading-matter, and that young woman congratulated herself upon the fact that Allan had forgotten Mr. Rayne's existence. Half an hour later, however, he remembered it. Roberta stood brushing out her hair, Allan sat on the edge of the bed, kicking off his boots. He was essentially the sort of person who sat on beds, constitutionally incapable of acknowledging the existence of bedroom chairs.

"You don't, by any chance, meet that young Rayne at Miss Carew's, do you?" he asked.

Roberta brushed her hair over her face and answered with studied carelessness.

"I believe he was there to-night," she said.

"Don't you know?"

"Well, I hardly spoke to him."

Allan's face clouded.

"Why quibble? Why couldn't you say right out, at first, that he was there?"

"Well, if I didn't speak to him. . . ."

"I didn't ask you that. . . . I asked you if you met him." Hopelessness assailed him, took and shook him by the throat. "My dear girl," he said, "can't you see how *awful* it's going to be if I can't—trust you?"

She said:

"Well, it's only a white lie . . . and a weeny one. Sorry. . . ."

"Not even white lies, Bobbie, please. Good heavens, where are we if we can't tell the truth to each other? Can't you see how important it is?" And again hopelessness assailed him because he felt she couldn't.

But Roberta said she could.

"Allan . . . don't lecture me. . . . I do hate being lectured."

"I don't want to lecture you."

"Then don't. Be nice."

She brushed her hair back from her face and came and leaned over the rail of the bed.

"*Why* do you hate poor Mr. Rayne so much?" she enquired.

"Because he's got 'bounder' written all over him. I don't want you to know bounders, Bobbie."

"But I don't believe he is . . . not really, darling."

"You're an extraordinary girl. You ought to be able at a glance to see what he is. Where's your instinct?"

"Oh, that's so silly. . . . Even if there *were* anything . . . anything . . . not nice . . . about him. After all, men always take their cue from the girl."

"But it's never worth risking that sort of thing. It's hateful. I can't bear the thought of your knowing questionable men. Besides, it isn't necessary."

"Well, how's one to tell? Most men are the same, on top. There was Martyn: you didn't think he was questionable, yet he wanted to make love to me. . . . And there was your brother. Everybody thought he was all right. Pen and your mother think so now."

"I know. Don't let us talk of that. . . ."

A shadow moved across his face: his level brows drew together.

"Well, you see," said Roberta. "Besides, Allan musn't be a naughty horrid birdlet and be jealous of his nice little wife."

Allan looked up at her. The cloud moved across his face and disappeared like a shadow before the sudden shining of the sun. He smiled.

"Not jealous," he said, catching her mood.

Through her thin ridiculous night-dress the grace and beauty of her burned and scorched him. Her hazel eyes, like two veiled servants, guarded and shrouded the cool calculation which rose up and looked out of them. Coquettishly she touched Allan's shoulder with the edge of the silver-backed brush she never had time to polish.

"Don't like living in a cage," she said. "Birdlets ought to trust each other."

"This birdlet does."

"What's the matter then?"

"Nothing. . . . Come and kiss me, Bobbie."

She came slowly and sat on his knee, putting her face against his. He put his arms about her and held her tight. With the calm resolute abandon of dispassion she yielded herself to his embrace. Her eyes closed in an ecstasy of distaste and a little quiver of self-pity ran through her, not that she gave herself in cold blood, but that she must give herself at all.

CHAPTER SEVEN

1

ALLAN, with Roberta's kisses to brace him, bent himself anew to this task of moulding or remoulding the giver of them. He went warily, realising that though he hated and distrusted this friendship of Roberta's with the Invertebrates (which was his name for Tommy Carew and her friends), he must not put himself out of court by forbidding it. You wouldn't get far that way with Roberta, who had all the obstinacy of weak natures, all the jargon of liberty and freedom of those who never come within a hundred miles of understanding the meaning of either. Her acquaintance with the Invertebrates, so Allan calculated, would come to an end with his own late work, either at Christmas or ever so little beyond it. And seeing that it was now the middle of the first week in December it certainly looked as if the Invertebrates would have but little time to mar his beautiful attempts to achieve for Roberta a really crystal soul.

He had just settled down to this comfortable conviction when something else happened which revealed to him how unquestionably muddy was the material upon which he had to work.

It was in the tube, and his gaze alighted suddenly upon three studies of Roberta in Hilmer Roydon's advertisement frames. In a way he had grown used to seeing Roberta's face staring out at him in this public fashion, but it was now so long since it had done so that he crossed the lift to look particularly at these new studies. There was a study of Roberta in Japanese costume; another in a garden and another in very little at all. And, strangely enough, though it was the last which first caught Allan's eye (as it probably caught other people's), it was at the one in Japanese costume that he found himself staring. For it was that which gave the truth away. These studies were new. Roberta had "sat" for them recently. He knew that beyond

doubt because the Japanese costume was fastened with a brooch which he had given Roberta less than a month ago. She had seen and admired it in some shop window, and his pleasure in Roberta's improved taste had triumphed over his conviction of extravagance when he went inside and bought it for her. Even in this colourless photographic reproduction that single emerald set in its thin ring of platinum was as familiar as the nose on his face. He became suddenly very angry. He walked up from the station at a breakneck pace and let himself into the house. It was Roberta's birthday, and he had left the office early in order to take her out to dinner and to a theatre, for which he had secured Dress Circle tickets. She was upstairs dressing, and as he let himself into the house her gay voice called down that she was nearly ready and that he was to go up. He would have gone up to-night in any case; for he was too angry to cool his heels down there in the hall. Roberta had put on her prettiest frock and stood in front of her glass putting the finishing touches to her hair.

"Hallo!" she said. "You're nice and early. . . . Will I do?"

She turned and waited for him to come up and kiss her. He did nothing of the sort. The anger in his face looked out at her, killing her smile and checking the words on her lips.

"Roberta, why didn't you tell me you had given Roydon a new sitting?"

"Roydon? A new sitting? Whatever do you mean?" said Roberta. Her voice had the pathetic inflection of the unjustly accused; she looked injured and very pretty. But that didn't help her, because, for the moment, Allan was beyond the appeal of the physical.

"You know quite well what I mean," he said. "Roydon is showing three new photographs of you, and I want to know when they were taken."

He hated himself for laying the trap, but it had to be. There was nothing big or fine about him and nothing generous. He was male to his finger-tips, blatant, rampart male, with all the cave-dweller's instinct to hurt the woman who had deceived him. He wanted, savagely, to humiliate her, here in the midst of her finery, and to spoil her evening's treat. Roberta, on the other hand, was concerned less with Allan's anger (with which she thought she could cope) than with Hilmer Roydon's duplicity (with which she was aware she couldn't). He had

taken?"

"Months ago, I tell you."

She saw from the whitening
angry.

"How many months?"

"How can I remember? Bef

"All of them? What about t

"Oh!" She laughed. "I didn't
make a fuss about."

Something, not alone the thing
in her voice as she said it, jerked
things he thought he had forgotten
for the first time in his arms, felt
his touch. Beneath the veneer
common. . . .

"I'm not making a 'fuss' about
you a plain question. When was
costume taken?"

"With the others, of course . . .

"Before we were married?"

"I've said so, haven't I?"

"You have. I give you one more

"Take it back? Of course I
should I?"

He was very quiet.

"You still stick to it that the

..

"Nothing," she said.

"Nothing at all?"

He came over and touched her arm.

"Roberta, you told me a deliberate lie. Was it necessary?"

She pulled herself away from his hand.

"Oh, don't touch me! You make me sick. You've got a filthy mind, you have. . . . I detest you!"

"Why didn't you tell me you were going to Roydon's studio?"

"Because I knew you'd object. . . . I did ask you . . . twice before. . . . You didn't like it. You object to so many things!"

"Do I, Roberta?"

"Oh, don't talk to me. . . . I'm sick of it, I tell you. . . . Such a fuss . . . about a little white lie! . . . While we're about it, you may as well know something else as well. Mr. Rayne's given me the chance of getting a photograph contract with some firm or other in America. If you hadn't made all that fuss about my sitting for Roydon I'd have told you all about it; but I can't stand arguments and rows. It's your own fault and, anyway, you can't say I haven't told you about this new offer. It isn't a job you see advertised. It's all a matter of influence."

"I see. Mr. Rayne's influence?"

"Yes."

"And why should Mr. Rayne take so much interest in you?"

"Oh, Lord, do shut up! You make me tired. I call it jolly decent of him. And why shouldn't I earn a little for myself? It isn't as though you're rolling—not exactly."

Allan stood like stone. It seemed to him that whole centuries passed before he got out what he wanted to say.

"I want to know what Mr. Rayne is getting out of it."

"*Getting out of it?*" Roberta withered him with scorn. "Getting out of it? What should he get out of it? What on earth do you mean?"

Through the thin frock he saw her bosom rise and fall in her anger: her eyes darkened with it and her face flushed. Even in her fury her beauty put out fingers and touched him. He clenched his hands and looked away. If he looked at her, even now, he was lost.

"You know well enough what I mean."

She stared at him. The flush had died out of her face; her

eyes lashed him like cold steel. It was as though she measured him up, delivered judgment; but with a low, insolent satisfaction, infinitely galling.

"You've got a nice sort of mind, I *must* say!"

Standing there by the window, he was deadly quiet. What she said didn't matter: but that she said it in that cold, passionless tone hurt hideously. He couldn't think why.

"If I thought things like that I'd keep them to myself. It shows what you must be yourself. . . . Besides, do you think being married to you isn't enough? I give you *my* word it is. . . ."

He hated her in the sudden furious way he hated people who spat on the public highway.

"Oh, for God's sake!" he said and, turning on his heel, went out of the room.

2

Downstairs, in the front room they called the dining-room, the fire was at its last gasp. Allan went over to it, leaned his arms on the mantelshelf and bowed his head on them. He stayed so for several minutes, and when he moved the sleeves of his coat were grey with dust. He brushed it off mechanically, as though he scarcely saw it, as though in this hideous clarity of vision which had come to him he saw so many other things, so much more important. It was as though upstairs he had looked down over the edge of Roberta's beauty and found nothing there. And even the beauty somehow had coarsened and cheapened. He remembered things that had happened, that he did not know had worked like that into his memory, as though they had been written in invisible ink and Roberta's dull scorn had been the acid which made the writing visible.

The door opened and she came in, switching on the light. She had slipped her coat over her thin frock, and her face rose, flushed and charming, over its black fur collar. The red-gold of her hair escaped beneath a brimless hat of black tulle that was bound with a wreath of green leaves.

"I'm ready," she said, "if you are."

The honey sweetness of her tone, the soft amiability of her

face—both were incredible. He stared at her, then, stammering a little, he said, "I'm not . . . I'm not going."

"Don't be silly!" she said. "I'm sorry I lost my temper, but you were very aggravating."

"You told me a lie. . . . You deceived me! Not for the first time. . . . You're making it impossible for me to trust you any more!"

"Oh, if you're going to begin all over again. . . ."

"I'm not. But we can't go out . . . now. . . . You must see we can't. They'd turn us out in five minutes for brawling."

The amiability of her face cracked, like a mask.

"You mean you refuse? You'll deliberately spoil my evening?"

"It isn't I who've spoilt it."

"Who is it, then? I'm never to have any pleasure, I suppose? I'm just to stick here in this poky place and slave for you—for nothing."

He remembered the dust on his coat.

"You don't slave very hard," he said. "You haven't even dusted the mantelshef to-day."

"I suppose you think you're very clever?" she said. Her voice was not angry, but quite sweet and seductive. She smiled and came closer, so that he saw the fine, the almost incredibly fine, texture of her skin and its flawless transparency. Beneath the open coat and the thin frock her body stirred: she held his eyes with her own.

"I don't think I'm clever at all," he said slowly; "but I think you are."

Her smile deepened.

"Then be nice to me. . . . I'm sorry I was a beast."

She leaned towards him, her eyes narrowed and shining. The scent she affected sprang out at him, faint but enticing. Her hand touched his shoulder.

"Allan . . . be nice. . . ."

Allan stood rigid, but his eyelids flickered. Something fierce and hot flowed over him like lava, then suddenly streamed back from him, leaving him strangely calm and still. It was his calmness which astounded him. It was a thing so real, so intense, it seemed almost to be imbued with visibility. He looked into its eyes with his own, and those of Roberta, narrowed, shining, infinitely alluring, he no longer saw at all.

"I'm sorry," he said; "but I'm not coming."

"You mean that?"

"Absolutely."

She swung round and began buttoning up her coat.

"Very well!" she said, "as you please. Only—don't say I haven't apologised. . . . It isn't my fault."

He said nothing. He looked at her, but even now the only thing he saw was the startling phenomenon of his own intense unbelievable calm. But over it, as Roberta turned and went out and the closing of the front door reached his ears, there came, flooding, a sense of triumph. It had been a fight. Against Roberta and the maddening quality of her beauty and her intention that he should succumb. And he had won. It was his first victory, and it elated him.

He was full of it as he made up the fire, drew up a chair to the table, collected his materials and sat down to write. He was surprised at the perspicacity of his mind, at its cool deliberate concentration: at the ease with which he marshalled his ideas and set them down in writing before him. He worked on steadily until the clock on the mantelshelf struck eleven with the sharp triumph of its kind. Allan's mind, jerked out of its avenue of tranquillity, shifted uneasily from thought to thought, then recoiled in dismay. Where and with whom was Roberta? At a quarter past the hour she returned. He heard her key in the lock and the sound of her footsteps going on up the stairs. Stifling an instinct to rush out after her, Allan sat there and finished his article. At twelve o'clock, when he wrote the last word, only a painful throbbing of his senses proclaimed at how great a cost the victory had been won and where it was incomplete; that and the barb of wretchedness when his eyes fell upon the blankness of his undisturbed bed.

For Roberta, majestic, offended, had elected to sleep in the spare room.

3

The amiability of her manner next morning was not more surprising than the sullen sweetness of it. It seemed impossible that the two things could go together like that, or that she could keep them united for so long. She answered his morning

greeting in a tone several degrees more affable than his and made intelligent remarks about the weather, which, here in the second week of December, was making commendable efforts to emerge from wet warmth into bright, windy coldness. Allan, in no mood for conversation, read the morning paper and thought how delightful a world without newspapers would be and that John Wilkes, after all, had gone to prison for very little. . . .

Suddenly he put the paper down and plunged.

"It would be interesting," he said, "to know who had the privilege of paying for your dinner last night."

Roberta smiled. "I shouldn't worry if I were you," she said. "He could well afford it."

Allan got up out of his chair, pushed it back and stood leaning over the table, gripping its edge with his hands.

"So it *was* Rayne, was it?"

Roberta stirred her tea, but did not look at him.

"Well, it was your own fault. I had to have some dinner, anyway; and I'd promised to let Mr. Rayne have an answer about his offer, which, by the way, I've accepted."

"Am I to understand that you went and gave it him in person?"

"Oh, it was quite proper! I knew Tommy was going to be there. . . . We all had dinner in Soho. After that we went back to Mr. Rayne's studio and I had three photographs taken. That was quite proper, too. Tommy was there all the time. I've arranged for the proofs to be sent to you. . . . So you see you're really making a lot of fuss about nothing, aren't you?"

Allan let go of the table, pushed the chair up against it and stood clear.

"Is that another lie?" he asked.

"No, it isn't. It's the truth."

"You give me your word of honour that Miss Carew was there all the evening?"

"Of course she was. Really, you know, Allan, you haven't got a very nice mind."

"Oh, damn my mind!" said Allan, and lighted a cigarette.

Roberta laughed.

"Don't you think you ought to apologise?" she asked.

"What for? My mind?"

"Well, yes."

"Then I'm not going to."

"You ought to do something with it, you know. It wants sterilising."

She laughed again and followed him out into the hall, watching him get into his coat and collect his hat and stick. When he was ready she opened the front door and stood there, raising her face as if she expected him to kiss her. From the house opposite a middle-aged man let himself out into the street and smiled across at Roberta, raising his hat. Roberta was always charming to her neighbours.

Allan bent and kissed her cheek.

"Good morning," he said, and went.

"Good morning" was the sign and symbol of Allan's displeasure. Its formal politeness was meant to rebuke the easy assumption of her casual "good-bye"; but, somehow, when the hall door was shut it made Roberta laugh. She went back into the breakfast-room and began piling the crockery on a tray, until she remembered and stopped. For this was Mrs. Noakes's day: Mrs. Noakes, this morning, would deal with the aftermath of breakfast. She would also polish the grates, get rid of the dust and make the bed. Roberta put it in the singular like that because Roberta intended to make the bed in the spare room herself. Otherwise Mrs. Noakes might wonder: and it wasn't good that Mrs. Noakes should do anything of the sort. The placid waters of Mrs. Noakes's respectable soul must not be disturbed: she was obviously one of those people who believed that in all happy marriages husbands and wives slept together. It was an arrangement, Roberta thought, which had drawbacks, but she did not feel equal to explaining what they were to Mrs. Noakes. It was a good deal easier to make that single bed herself.

She went upstairs to do it and she did it very badly. Its amazing badness struck even Roberta.

"Oh, well," she said to herself, "I shouldn't get a prize for bed-making, anyhow. And I'm sure I don't want to."

In the front bedroom, where Allan had slept, the bed was unstripped and the curtains still drawn against the morning. Roberta rectified matters with some show of impatience, her thoughts running on the ways of a man with a house.

"Lazy beasts!" she said, and eyed herself critically in the glass.

"Well, it's time I got some money somehow," she reflected, "if this is the best costume I've got."

It was. She brushed it anew, pulled on the tulle hat (which did not "go" with the costume) and ran downstairs, wrote a note for Mrs. Noakes (which told her there was cold ham and rice pudding for lunch), left the key of the kitchen door in its customary place and took herself off.

Mrs. Noakes's reflections upon reading Roberta's note and looking at Roberta's house were, perhaps, not entirely uninfluenced by the fact that Mrs. Noakes was not partial to cold ham and warmed-up rice pudding. But the germ of truth was in those reflections, all the same. They approximated to those of Roberta herself when she had thrown open Allan's bed and pulled back the window curtains; but they were not half so printable.

Not that Roberta would have cared. She was going over to Highgate to see her mother, who had a cold, and whom she would leave in good time for her lunching appointment with Douglas Rayne. He was bringing with him, not Tommy Carew, who said she had something a good deal more exciting to do, but the proofs of last night's photographs. There were two that must not be sent to Allan, but she wanted to see them. Not that there was anything wrong with the photographs, of course, only Allan wouldn't be likely to understand how a glimpse of a rounded shoulder could improve a photograph; but no one could say Mr. Rayne hadn't behaved like a gentleman. Allan would have to get used to it. Why, there were girls who sat for the . . . altogether. Quite nice girls, too. Roberta had met some of them at Tommy's "affairs." Allan was a Puritan and therefore always imagined the worst. It was so silly of him, because he ought to know by now that she wasn't that sort.

She smiled, partly at her thought and partly at the conductor who stood at her side and demanded fares.

"Haighgate, please," said Roberta.

The "a" slipped in unnoticed, as it always did when Roberta was excited.

Roberta found her mother in bed with a hot-water bottle and a temperature. She followed the woman from upstairs (who had let her in) into the kitchen, and stood watching her as she mixed bovril in a cup and said that Roberta's mother was "pretty bad." Mrs. Miller had not liked Roberta as Roberta Leigh, and did not give any indication of liking her any better now that she was Roberta Suffield. She looked at the dark blue costume Roberta had despised and at the little hat which didn't belong to it, and she sniffed.

"You've not come to work, seemingly," she said. "Your mother ought to see a doctor."

"Why doesn't she, then?"

"Can't abear them, she says. But I don't like the looks of her."

"I'll call on Dr. Young as I go back," Roberta said. "But I expect she'll be all right if she stays in bed."

The woman from upstairs sniffed again, with more decision, perhaps, but no more delicately. Sniffing, Roberta reflected, wrinkling her nose in disgust, was not at all a pretty habit.

"Mrs. Miller thinks you ought to see a doctor," she said to her mother, taking a seat at the bedside and sticking out her feet because she liked to look at them.

"Does she?" said Mrs. Leigh in a hoarse whisper. "Well, Mrs. Miller can go on thinking so if she likes."

"But it's so silly," Roberta said. "If you're ill you ought to see a doctor. Anybody'd think you were a Particular Baptist or a Peculiar Brethren or something."

"I'm particular enough, thank you," said Mrs. Leigh, "and I'm peculiar enough to stop at home and do my own work instead of gallivanting out in the morning."

"I'm not gallivanting," Roberta said. "I've got an appointment."

"Appointment! What sort of an appointment?"

"I've got to see some photograph proofs . . . if they're not good I'll have to sit again. If they *are* I'll give you one."

"You needn't trouble. The house is littered up with your photographs as it is."

"You can't be very ill, you know," said Roberta, "because you're so disagreeable."

"May be," wheezed her mother. "Who's taking these photographs?"

"A friend of Tommy's. He's an art photographer and his people are tobacconists or cigarette-makers or something. He's trying to get me a contract for the lids of boxes and advertisements. It may mean a hundred a year to me."

"What's this young man taking so much interest in you for?"

"Well, he's a photographer himself . . . it's his business. I s'pose he'll get a commission. I'm sure I don't know. Anyway, it's a nice friendly act."

"I'm sure it is," croaked Mrs. Leigh, and was interrupted by a hideous fit of coughing, in the middle of which Mrs. Miller came up with the bovril and stood at the bedside sniffing with devastating regularity.

"You'd better drink this," she said when the fit subsided, "yer pore chest sounds quite raw."

"It feels it," said Mrs. Leigh.

"Look here, Mrs. Leigh," said the woman from upstairs, "you'd best see a doctor, if you asks me."

"I haven't," snapped Mrs. Leigh, who had her own reasons for disliking the woman from upstairs and detested being under an obligation to her.

"Well, I'm only speaking for yer good. . . . With a cold on yer chest like that it ain't reasonable not to see a doctor."

"Then I'll be unreasonable," said Mrs. Leigh, and worked hard at swallowing the bovril.

"Really, mother, you're ridiculous," Roberta said. "I'm going to call on Dr. Young as I go along: so we needn't argue about it any more." She rose to go.

"Well, if he comes I shan't see him, so that's flat."

"Oh, nonsense," said Roberta. "I'll look in to-morrow and see how you are. Now good-bye, and do be sensible. Father can look after himself when he comes in. I don't suppose it'll hurt him to do something for himself for once."

She kissed her mother, picked up her gloves and walked to the door. Mrs. Miller followed her, sniffing. She sniffed all the way along to the front door, saying nothing. She was not a woman at all: she had become the personification of a sniff.

"Good-bye," said Roberta.

"Good morning," said Mrs. Miller.

It was the second time that morning that Roberta's "Good-bye" had been so qualified; and for the second time she laughed as though she found it amusing.

Mrs. Miller shut the door and sniffed herself back into the kitchen. She hated Roberta. She always had hated her, but she hated her more than ever now because she had found somebody to marry her. Mrs. Miller had two girls of her own and nobody, so far, had been found to do anything of the sort for them. Good honest girls, too, they were, that would make anybody good wives. It was so she distinguished them from Roberta. But men were fools. Pretty faces were all they thought about.

The faces of the Misses Miller were not pretty.

Mrs. Leigh reiterated her intention concerning the doctor many times before his arrival. "I won't see him," she said obstinately: but she did. For by the time he came she was beyond protestations, saving all her energy for the fight with Death.

"I won't die," she said to Henry Leigh, as he sat, speechless, at her side. "I won't . . . I won't."

The fight was long and difficult. Martha Leigh did not die easily. She gave Death infinite trouble; but for all that, at five o'clock next morning Death dragged her, protesting and fighting still, out into the dark. She lay there, at the last, very quietly, taking the rest she had never taken in life. Nothing now disturbed her; neither her doubts of Roberta nor that young woman's noisy grief when she came later and indulged it. It was as if, even now, she still saw through Roberta; understood that her crying was not really painful and that she would know the exact moment at which to stop. And the quiet smiling of the dead face seemed to say that here, in Death, a sense of the exquisite humour of things had come to her, as in life it had certainly never done.

CHAPTER EIGHT

1

FOR Allan the mask of Roberta's tears shut out a multitude of new miseries and uncertainties. Roberta wept. That, for Allan, was sufficient. He did not know, as that quiet sleeper knew, that Roberta would not weep too much and not painfully. He knew only that she was unhappy and needed comfort: and whilst he strove to give it her the breach between them drew together and was healed.

Roberta's grief was becoming, perhaps because she indulged it wisely. At the funeral she looked as pretty in her black clothes as nearly four months ago she had looked at her wedding. (Ridiculous to remember they had been married no longer than that!) Black suited Roberta, if possible, better than white satin and orange blossom, and on the whole she was grateful to her mother, if not for dying, at least for dying at such a convenient time of the year. It would, as she observed to Tommy Carew, have been "a good deal worse if this had happened in the spring. It would have been awful to have had to wear black just when the weather was getting warm."

Allan, however, was much more deeply affected by the death of Roberta's mother than he understood or would have believed possible. It came to him not only as a shock, but as a bewildering example of the dreadful possibility of the impossible. You could not believe that the energy which had propelled her through fifty odd years had come suddenly to an end. It struck Allan continually as ridiculous. Even in church before her coffin he had the impression that at any moment the lid would lift and she would rise and chide them all for sitting there wasting time. For weeks he had at intervals a funny insistent picture of her hurling herself through Eternity, as she had hurled herself through Time. . . .

But her death, whatever else it did or did not do, drew Allan

was not exactly a genius at his family, too, had been an expert for himself and for Roberta, had sent her had gone nowhere useful: you could always "do" then there swept over Allan the grudging the amount of time and reduction of life's wherewithal. up at last in its vast machine him rest, and there were times think about it. He saw civil dividend-paying concern, and he

"I don't see what you're all uneasy, would say. "This Bolshevik Society. I'm sorry to hear a son

Allan said he didn't know Bolsheviks had discovered one wouldn't work then he had no right

"And you'll look nice under Bolsheviks
"I expect they'd make you a socialist

He seemed to enjoy the idea of enjoyed it, too. "I shouldn't mind a little bit if I need only scavenge would be better than the office two he said, to the Comet eating in for so many weeks past. He found

"It isn't the world you want to alter, but human nature," he told Allan. "And human nature doesn't change."

"I don't agree with you," Allan said. Allan had been to the war and knew that it did. It was one of the things the war had taught him—that human nature was continually changing.

But John Suffield had not been to the war and he stuck to his belief that human nature was the one unchangeable reality. That was why he thought war would go on for ever and that all Utopias were absurd. His power of resistance to all ideas that were distasteful or disturbing was astounding: he could not imagine a world where men and women no longer acted from tradition or from habit. Any Utopia of which he might have been able to conceive would have been only a glorified earth, where things went on as to-day, but with the element of suffering somehow—and miraculously—eliminated. He did not want people to be unhappy or to suffer. But Allan's Utopia—if he had framed one—would have been just rather than happy, built not upon a common inability to suffer, but upon a standard of equality, in which the type went down before the individual. And change was the essence of it. But John Suffield's Utopia would never have changed. It would have had a quality of hideous permanence. And whenever the talk ran to this subject Allan saw that world hovering between them—that static world that his father loved—opposed for ever to that kinetic world of progression and initiative about which his own thoughts played so unceasingly.

Roberta's Utopia, of course, had nothing in common with either of them: she conceived it only as a place where money grew plentifully on trees. But when Allan talked like this of the office she grew worried, because she remembered it was she who kept him there. Not that he ever reminded her of that. She had nothing there to complain of. Nobody more generous than Allan.

But this heavy toll of his evenings no longer left her dull. She had found many ways during the last month of combating that. What worried her now about Allan's late evenings was not that they had begun and had continued, but that they couldn't go on for ever. Even Roberta knew that some day they must come to an end.

And she wondered sometimes what she would do when they did.

December of nineteen-nineteen was essentially a month which reminded you of the old joke that England has no climate but only a number of samples of weather, and Roberta, delicately plaintive, imagined she had caught a cold. Over the Christmas holidays, and much to Allan's satisfaction, she was inclined to play the invalid, and in this new mood of restful submission Allan found her enchanting. He plied her with tonic wines and consideration, and felt his old instinct of protection blossom anew beneath the sun of her rare docility. The things to which he was hostile were buried in some mysterious fashion beneath it; he saw only the Roberta of the red-gold hair, the hazel eyes, the delicate skin and exquisite mouth. He burned with eagerness to please her. It was absurd and pathetic, his eagerness: he gave himself up to it with passion.

And then Roberta got better, or grew tired of the rôle of invalid. At any rate, her lassitude left her and her morning lack of appetite. She buoyed herself up with Allan's cossetting and his wines, and clung, as to a raft, to his suggestion that she had suffered profoundly from the shock of her mother's death. But in her heart disquiet had already entered.

To drown it she turned and plunged back into the centre of the things from which she had temporarily stood aside. She went to matinees and shops with Caryl—a new triumphant Caryl with the right to put B.A. (Hons.) after her name! "And Honours in Pure Maths!" Allan would say as though to him his sister's achievement savoured of black magic! Tommy came again to tea and dragged Roberta off with her to her flat in Bloomsbury. Douglas Rayne was there, as of old; as thin as ever, as insolent, too, and as exquisitely dressed. Allan had called him a "bounder," but Allan was predisposed to jealousy and was always inclined to take this attitude to anyone who did not care for books as he did. Rayne, of course, knew numbers of women: but he was a gentleman. He had never even kissed her. Never even tried to kiss her, which was much more remarkable. Roberta was grateful, though she was ready to sell her kisses to obtain what she wanted. Was she going to get it? She couldn't help feeling that it was time word came from America about those photographs. Would she get that contract or not?

But that was a subject to which Mr. Rayne never referred. He just went on being affable, amusing and "gentlemanly," and Roberta could not imagine why Allan should object to him. Even on those occasions when they dined *tête-à-tête* Mr. Rayne conducted the proceedings with every semblance of propriety. A bishop, so Roberta put it, might have listened to their conversation: it was impossible, she thought, that Mr. Rayne could be a "rotter." He seemed to want nothing save the sight of her happiness and enjoyment. His bored acquiescence in life quivered at the sight of her vivacity, as though it borrowed deeply from her youth and vitality. His air of habitual fatigue fascinated her; that and the subtle suggestion he carried about with him of some hidden grief that poisoned the springs of happiness. He seldom laughed and his smile was not as other people's. It restricted itself to the right of his mouth—as though one side only of his face saw a joke—and it never spread to his eyes. They smouldered and stared, taking in Roberta's "points" as though she had been a race-horse. Roberta rather admired his eyes, which were dark and heavily lashed and lidded. She was not clever enough to know that they proclaimed aloud the fact that their owner had long ago scrawled "*Vanitas Vanitatum*" across the whole of the page of life. And perhaps she wouldn't have cared if she had known; Roberta considered herself a match for any man. She believed, as she believed in nothing else, in that shield of her not "being that sort." Amid the clouds of her perennial vanity she moved serenely. Besides, it may be that one does not have a Delia King in the family for nothing!

Out of his manifold experience young Rayne went carefully. Very carefully: he never made a mistake. He was always stealthy and leisured, so pre-eminently what Roberta thought "so gentlemanly." He had reduced seduction to a fine art, and he knew how to wait without sign or quiver of impatience. The plum invariably dropped, exquisitely ripe, into his mouth: and this particular plum in the ripening amused him considerably. He had found the taking of those photographs as interesting as useful. Woman's natural vanity was a marvellous piece of foresight upon the part of Providence: it made the way of the male a good deal easier. Because of it he told far fewer lies than would otherwise have been necessary, which was just as well, because lies were exhausting, since you had to

remember the lies you had told before and to what they had committed you—a trying business for one who liked a quiet life. Not that many lies, with Roberta, had been necessary: the one concerned with the tale of a contract had been so tremendously successful. She had swallowed it whole. And it really had been fun taking those photographs. The girl was a beauty right enough: her neck and shoulders were like blue-veined marble, from which her head rose, flower-like and exquisite. But—catch the guvnor giving anybody a contract of *that* sort!

Out of his experience, too, he saw that Roberta was a fool, for, even as Martyn Thorp had done, he had looked at her to some purpose. She was a fool right enough, but she was an extraordinarily pretty fool. The freshness of her skin, its freedom from paint and powder was unusual and unbelievably fascinating to the thin young Rayne who, in the whole range of his experience, had never encountered anyone with such a flawless complexion. He amused himself by wondering how she had come to marry that solemn young man with a limp and a taste for literature! Literature! Douglas Rayne would laugh, remembering the picture Tommy had drawn for him of a courtship, honeymoon and marriage conducted like a reading-tour in the company of Lamb and Keats and Shelley and Johnnies like that. It was funny, that, damn funny! Some fellows never knew their luck!

Not that the thin young Rayne regarded marriage as "luck." Marriage was opportunity; nothing else, except, perhaps, an unnecessary complication. It was a complication now, of course; but Rayne had not hitherto known marriage to form any permanent obstacle to his desires. Only—one went more carefully.

He went so carefully with Roberta that her stupid phrase about his gentlemanliness bit down deeply into her mind. It went to strengthen the moral shield she carried about with her—that undying belief that she was not "that sort." Taken together Tommy found them a trifle tiresome, because Tommy *was* "that sort" (it explained why she need work so seldom) and she knew the truth about the thin young Rayne's quality of gentlemanliness. Like the beauty of Tommy's complexion it went no more than skin-deep. Not that Miss Carew cared in the least about his lack of faithfulness to her. She asked a

good deal of him, but not that. It was the last thing she would ask of any man—certainly of Duggie Rayne. They were admirably matched.

For all that she told him, once, that he might leave the kid alone.

"She's cold, Dug. Constitutionally unaffected by the genus Man. Fact. . . . Of course she likes men to make fools of themselves over her, but that's another matter."

"She's a taker, is she, not a giver?" Rayne wanted to know.

"You can put it that way if you like," Tommy told him.

Rayne did like.

As for Tommy, her sense of duty to Roberta was served by advising her never again to visit Rayne's studio alone.

"Oh, well—no reason," she said. "But you may as well be on the safe side. And I know men better than you do. You just take my tip!"

Roberta grieved for the state of Tommy's mind. But whilst Tommy, no doubt about it, underrated Mr. Rayne's quality of gentlemanliness quite alarmingly, she had implanted a doubt which took root. For the moment Roberta's confidence in her own virtue and that which it inspired in other people quivered away from its foundations. For the time being things were "spoiled." After the *tête-à-tête* dinners now she insisted primly that she must go straight home.

She went, and Rayne took himself off. A tiger of rage may have smarted within him, but you would never have guessed it; his amiability remained unimpaired. The gesture with which he raised his hat and accepted her ruling pleased Roberta's little soul. It was a very little soul and easily pleased. It loved a gesture, even when there was nothing behind it, or when, perhaps, there was too much.

3

Occasionally Allan had a thrust of memory, apt to be disturbing. But Roberta was learning how to deal with such occasions, so that it was not she who found them disturbing. But other things were. . . .

One Thursday evening midway through January, Allan surprised Roberta by reaching home a good hour earlier than he

was expected. Roberta had been to Tommy's, but at eight o'clock an intolerable lassitude had descended upon her and she had come away, her thoughts resolutely fixed on bed and sleep to keep away those other thoughts, must less comforting, which assailed her with the numbing effect of pellets of ice. And though it was only nine o'clock there was a light in the hall, and as she fitted her key in the lock Allan's step came up the passage and Allan's hand on the door-knob anticipated the turning of her key.

She offered her face for his caress, said she was tired and that she would go straight up to bed.

"What's the matter?" Allan asked.

"Nothing much. . . . I'm a bit run down, I think, and I suppose I've been dancing too much."

She spoke indifferently, but the fear in her heart looked out at her once more. It disturbed her because, until this evening, she thought she had forgotten it.

Later Allan came up with hot milk and biscuits, and the information that the close of the following week would see the end of his evening work. He was jovial about that and full of plans. They would make up for lost time. Caryl should get up a dance at Adelaide Lodge, where the rooms were big enough for dancing. Also there were plays to see, and Guen and Antony were going to have evenings at Tony's old room in Bloomsbury which since their marriage had been occupied by some artist or other who had only just cleared out. Tony's evenings, he explained, were a definite feature of the early days of Guen's acquaintance with him. "I expect they made love there," he said, "if they made it anywhere. . . . Love in an attic. A nice attic, Bobbie, in Bloomsbury . . . but not perhaps in the nice part of Bloomsbury. In Theobald's Road, over-looking half London. You might like to go occasionally."

Roberta said she would, and begged him to turn the light out because her head ached. So Allan pulled back a curtain and began to undress by the faint light of the street lamp without.

Beyond the window the night was beautiful, wrapped in January's diaphanous veil. The white stars clustered in its floating silver, and the stunted suburban trees rose dim behind it. The little road held an air of enchantment, and Allan stood there looking at it as if he were enchanted too. The night had

a beauty that somehow one missed in the day. Or had he merely a trick of "missing" things?

"You'll be horribly tired in the morning," said Roberta.

Allan dropped the blind and began his preparations for bed.

"By the way, darling," he said presently, "I hope you don't see much of young Rayne these days?"

"No—not much," said Roberta. She said it unblushingly, and to it she added, "And when I do it's business. . . . That old contract."

"Isn't that settled yet?"

"No. They want some more photographs."

"Then they can't have them."

"No, I don't think they can . . . it makes one so cheap."

"I hope you'll be firm about it. . . . I don't like to think of you having anything whatever to do with the bounder."

"I don't see why you want to begin about that at this time of night," said Roberta. "What's started you on it again?"

"Oh . . . just that he happened to come into the office to-day—some difficulty over a policy. . . . I wish you'd promise me not to see him again. . . . Don't you think you might?"

Under the bedclothes Roberta shrugged careless shoulders and took the line of least resistance.

"Oh, all right," she said, "if it'll please you."

"It will," said Allan.

There wouldn't be much chance, Roberta reflected, of her seeing anyone now that her freedom was coming to an end.

That was how she thought of Allan's imminent early arrival from the office—as a curtailment of her liberty. She really thought liberty was like that. She had a sudden vision of long winter evenings stretched out dully in front of her, dotted at intervals with a dinner in town, or a play or dance. And coffee and talk on Guen and Gore's "Thursdays." Talk that she couldn't understand, and coffee—for which she had no great liking.

She was still conscious, lying there in her white bed, of that horrible sensation of fatigue. She couldn't imagine why she should get tired of late in this dreadful fashion. And it wasn't only the tiredness. . . . She remembered the moment when in the dance her hand had dragged on Rayne's, when she had said, "I'm so sorry. . . . I'm afraid I must sit down for a minute." The red wine he had brought her had revived her,

but as she drank it a nightmare of a thought seared its way through her mind. It came again to her now. Of course, it couldn't be. . . . It was impossible. And the impossible did not happen. Only supposing, sometimes, it did? Self-pity engulfed her. She wished she had never got married. . . . She began to cry.

"Allan, I'm so tired, and you keep on lecturing me!"

Instantly Allan's arms enfolded her with an immense tenderness.

"My dear, I forgot. Don't cry. . . . I'm a clumsy beast! . . . You want a holiday. We must see what we can arrange."

She lay passive and weeping in his arms, and over him again there flooded that inordinate sense of tenderness, a great wave of that protective instinct by which she had caught—and by which she held—him. She was still a child to be comforted and looked after. He put his lips to her hair, patting her shoulder.

"No, don't, please, dear . . . don't, don't cry like that!"

For once, however, Roberta forgot the importance of leaving off at the right moment. She went on crying; not passionately, but drearily, hopelessly, and all the time Allan went on patting her shoulder and wondering what there was in her crying that should tear at him like this. He simply could not bear it.

4

Allan's late work broke up even earlier than he had expected. On the Thursday of the following week he suddenly found himself free at seven o'clock to go home. Antony Gore had phoned during the morning to tell him that they were all to be at the Attic that evening, and that Guen hoped he would come along and bring Roberta. At ten o'clock that morning the pleasing project had appeared hopeless; but work had sloughed off soon after six, and by seven Allan had his hat and coat on and was making a bee-line for Roberta and Highgate.

But Roberta was not at Highgate. On the dining-room mantelpiece a piece of paper was propped up upon which was written in Roberta's handwriting, which nothing seemed able to improve, "Have gone out. Shall not be later than ten."

It was signed with a big round childish "B," which stood for "Berta" or "Bobbie," as your fancy pleased.

"Damn!" Allan said, and was sensible of a chill, as though the fireless room had struck cold. He went upstairs, opened the wardrobe door and discovered that Roberta's evening dress was missing. Light dawned upon him. She had gone to one of Tommy's "affairs": it was only on these occasions, he knew these days, that Roberta wore her nicest frock. He recollected, too, that Tommy's flat was in Bloomsbury, near enough to the Attic to make it possible for him to collect Roberta *en route*.

Tommy's flat was not self-contained. Allan knocked at the big front door and asked for "Miss Carew."

"You'd better go up!" said the old hag who opened it. "She's having one of her everlasting parties by the sound of things. You're about the tenth I've opened the door to this evening and I'm about tired of it. Why you can't ring *her* bell I don't know."

Allan apologised and went on up the stairs. The house smelt musty and the stairs were not too clean: but as he ascended things improved. Red carpet appeared on the staircase, and black and white and purple drapings. Three closed doors opened out of the landing upon which Tommy's name appeared, and from behind the centre one noises of various and vociferous character were issuing. Allan hesitated for an instant, his hand on the knob of the door; then knocked. No answer. Allan repeated the knock, then, partly because he was in a hurry and partly because he was assailed not so much by impatience as by misgiving, he turned the handle and looked in. Through a haze of smoke he saw a number of unfamiliar faces and figures, whose owners were not yet aware of his presence. Above the din of laughter and talk a young man, dangling his legs from the table, was shouting something that seemed to be poetry—of sorts:

"To-morrow all our passion will be ashes."

"I beg your pardon," said Allan from the doorway. "I beg your pardon . . . but is my wife here?"

The din went on. Allan, raising his voice, tried again. "I beg your pardon. . . ." But the result was the same. He walked farther into the room and addressed himself to a young woman in a purple cloak and very little else, who turned her

head at that moment and saw him. "I want my wife," he said. "Can you tell me if she is here? Suffield . . . Mrs. Suffield."

The young woman in the purple coat turned from him, put her hands to her mouth and yelled:

"Here, shut up, some of you! Mr. Poet, *you* shut up. . . Here's a gentleman wants his wife!"

The din quieted. Through the comparative peace a feminine voice floated, insolently affectionate.

"You've come to the wrong house, darling."

Allan's good humour was deserting him.

"Is Miss Carew here?" he demanded. His voice sounded rude and angry, but it did not reach Miss Carew, who had her back to the door and her arms round the necks of two male somebodies.

"*To-morrow* . . ." began the poet again, as though afraid it would arrive before he had finished the first verse.

"Oh, shut up!" yelled the young woman in the purple cloak. "Do you think we want to hear your blasted rot all night, and with a gentleman wanting his wife, too?"

The poet subsided. The young woman in purple went over to Tommy and shook her.

"I don't know if you're gone suddenly deaf or what, but I've told you three times here's a gentleman wants his wife! D'you want me to yell myself hoarse?"

Tommy turned, still clinging to the necks of her companions who perforce turned with her, looking queerly at Allan, with their faces very close together, over Tommy's shoulder.

"*Who* wants his wife?" she demanded. "Most unreas'n'ble request, I call it . . . most unreas'n'ble. . . ."

Then she saw Allan and removed her arms so suddenly that the heads of her companions struck painfully together before their owners found themselves on the floor.

"Oh, it's you!" she said.

She came unsteadily over to Allan and stood looking at him as if striving to remember something.

"You're . . . you're Suffield, aren't you?" she said. She was very drunk.

"Yes," said Allan. "I thought I should find my wife here."

"Oh, you're the gentleman who wants his wife! . . ." She drew herself up, still making this tremendous effort to remember

something that dodged about on the brink of recollection. Then it came.

"Oh . . . s'cuse *me*, Mr. Suffield. . . . I couldn't think for the moment who you were. No, Bobbie isn't here. I asked her to come, but she had something better to do. . . . I'm having a little bottle party. . . . The idea is everybody comes with a bottle . . . of cold tea, of course! . . . Have a glass of something?"

"Thank you, no!" said Allan, and made for the door. As he closed it the voice of the poet was heard asking in a loud voice for the port.

Outside on the landing Allan stood still and tried to collect his thoughts. So *this* was the sort of "affair" Miss Carew gave and to which Roberta went so often? It was outrageous. His brain seemed to be boiling round with fury: he couldn't think. He could scarcely walk down the stairs.

But he reached the bottom at last, and opening the front door he let himself out into the street. It was beginning to rain, and the sensation of the drops on his face seemed to cool his anger. The thing struck him suddenly as funny. He stood still in the quiet street and laughed aloud.

Presently, when he stopped laughing and moved on, he discovered that he was overwhelmed with relief that Roberta had not been there. He wondered what he would have done, what he would have said, if she had been. But this friendship with Tommy Carew was coming to an end. He would make sure of that, at least.

He walked on to the Attic, turning that resolution over in his mind, and wondering vaguely once or twice where Roberta had actually gone.

Tommy, drunk as she was, could have told him. If he had listened outside her door he would have heard her telling her guests.

"Well, here's a do!" she said. "You wouldn't like to know, any of you, where the genelman's wife really is, I suppose?"

The company sat up. It wanted very much to know where the gentleman's wife really was. . . .

"Well, she's in a geneleman's flat at Victoria . . . gentleman you all know—Mr. Douglas Rayne—Esquire . . . I don't think. . . . Well, 'ere's luck to 'em, anyway!"

It was quite true. Roberta was with Douglas Rayne, but

she had gone there expecting to find Tommy. She knew nothing of the "bottle" party and had not been asked. Rayne had seen to that.

"It's a dirty trick, you know," Tommy had said to Rayne, but, after all, Roberta was a fool; a fool who didn't play the game; and she deserved to be taught a lesson. In any case, too, Miss Carew could not afford just then to offend Mr. Douglas Rayne, who for the time being had the "cinch" on her. It was awkward, damned awkward; but it couldn't be helped. All the same, once or twice during the evening, even through the fumes of drink and the smoke and innuendo she had evoked to drown misgivings, a streak of pity showed for the poor pretty fool she called her friend. But when Tommy felt the twinge of it she lulled it to sleep with more drink and the reflection that whatever happened Roberta would keep her mouth shut. She'd have sense enough for that. And she was married. Marriage, thank the Lord, covered a multitude of sins. Whenever Miss Carew remembered that she would toss off another glass of wine to the toast of "Well, 'ere's to marriage . . . the friend of every pore girl. I don't think! . . ."

And the poet would begin again, "*To-morrow all our passion will be ashes. . . .*"

CHAPTER NINE

1

TO Allan's way of thinking, Guen's "first" evening was very far from successful. At the last moment A.G. had been prevented from coming, but a good many other people had not, and between them they hemmed Guen in so successfully that Allan's ideas of a "quiet talk" had no chance whatsoever of survival. Quite early in the evening his amiable dislike of the writing fraternity broke out upon him like a rash, and he was glad when at nine o'clock the pretext of handing round coffee delivered him from the hands of a gentleman in knee-breeches who owned several woman's weeklies and ran them on the assumption that the feminine world is made up of flappers and expectant mothers. But in the middle of the coffee operations the door opened and Madeleine Hervey came in. Allan started, spilling hot coffee over his hand and down his trouser-leg.

"How do you do, Allan?" she said. "It's ages since we met!"

"Ages," said Allan. "Have some coffee?"

"No, thanks. I've just come from a terrific dinner. I heard Guen was in town and rushed on to see her."

Her bare head and thick wrap confirmed her statement, which seemed likely to be the Alpha and Omega of their conversation. To Allan, standing there before her with the cup of spilled coffee in his hand, it was as if he had never really seen Madeleine before. Her face, pale as ever in its soft frame of dark hair, yet suggested not only health, but happiness—the sort of happiness one strives after and wins for one's self, that is the result of character far more than of good fortune, that only comes to those who have built up their castle of hope from the ruins which have fallen clattering about their feet. But Allan, not knowing this, was strangely disconcerted by the quiet that looked out of her eyes, which invested the smile she

bent upon him when she suggested that he put down the coffee or offer it, perhaps, to somebody else. . . . Allan found her self-possession intolerable, and it dismayed him, because—he hadn't any. He could feel the colour rising in his face and rising the higher because Madeleine's did not rise at all, or rose so very little that in that dim room it was not betrayed. Only her pale face and quiet eyes, soft and gleaming, like black velvet. . . . To Allan, who could think of nothing to say, it seemed an age before she turned away to greet Guen and the people she knew. He finished with the coffee and, watching his opportunity, went over to Guen.

"Do you mind if I slip off?" he inquired.

"Of course I mind. . . ." She edged him into a corner by the door. "Look here, I've an editor to see in the morning and I can't sleep here. The bed hasn't been aired. Can you and Roberta put me up?"

He said "of course," and that she was to come on as soon as she liked.

"But why not wait? It isn't ten yet. And don't you want to have a chat with Madeleine?"

"I don't think so," he said. He resented Madeleine—or, more particularly, he resented the undeniable fact that her unexpected appearance had meant hot colour in his face, hot coffee down his trouser-leg. And it ought not to have done, for across the path of their friendship emotion of that sort had never been spilled. Even now Allan saw it only as a green and pleasant path in a familiar country; had forgotten, even if he had ever properly realised, that something which had given it a twist . . . carried it briefly and unsuccessfully into country much less familiar. Besides, it was just at that point they had turned their backs on the treacherous path: to Allan such glimpses of new country as the twist in the path had opened up had been fleet and meaningless, and if they had been anything else to Madeleine it was obvious she had forgotten them. That air of hers—of peace, of quiet happiness—was of the soul and indestructible. She stood alone, firmly rooted. She had character and—just a little—hardness. You couldn't be sorry for her or anxious. She had the courage to bid life stand and deliver. She couldn't be beaten or crushed. Neither could you prevent her from achieving happiness: she depended for that upon nobody.

Number Sixteen, when Allan reached it, was in darkness. He saw at once that Roberta had not returned. "Not later than ten," her note had said, and it was now well after eleven.

"Theatre, I expect," Guen said when she arrived. She sounded detached and unconcerned, as she probably was. Detachment and unconcern were the qualities she had brought at last to Allan's marriage. They masked other things. But she saw that to-night he was worried. "Any reason why she *shouldn't* have gone to a theatre?" she asked.

"Only that she couldn't have meant to go to a theatre if she intended to be home by ten o'clock."

"But couldn't she alter her mind?"

"Yes. But she hasn't. I'm being a fool, of course. It's running into that awful crowd."

"Miss Carew's crowd, you mean? Is 'awful' very fair? I'm quite sure you thought *my* crowd pretty 'awful,' didn't you?"

"But for different reasons. These people are mere hangers-on: they belong to the very outside edge of the fringe of the Arts. They've no standards, no occupation, no anything that matters. . . . The Bolsheviks would shoot the lot of them. To-night Miss Carew was very drunk. So, for that matter, was everybody else."

"Give me a cigarette, will you?" said Guen. "It's Tommy Carew, isn't it, the girl who won some newspaper cinema competition a few years ago? I know people who thought awfully well of her."

"Of her ability? Yes, but she hardly ever works. . . . If she drinks, that explains it."

"But does she?"

"She was drunk to-night."

"That doesn't prove your case. However, why do you let Roberta see so much of her if you disapprove of her like that?"

"How on earth am I to stop her? She's here, night after night, on her own. You can't wonder she gets bored. Thank God, that's over, anyway! This late work's the devil. . . . I've tried to get her to go round home to tea and to stay to dinner: but I gather Pen spreads herself there a bit too much. Caryl . . . whom she likes . . . is always shut up with her books or running off to the Hestons."

"My dear Allan, the Hestons gave up the Wokingham cottage back in October, and since they've been home Caryl's left them rather severely alone. (The family, by the way, spends an appalling amount of time wondering why!) It certainly isn't *Caryl* who's inaccessible: to my knowledge she's made at least three abortive efforts to drag Roberta into some dissipation or other within the last month."

"I've heard nothing of it."

Guen shrugged her shoulders.

"Hasn't she any other friends?"

"I don't think so. She doesn't seem to have a genius for friendship. Neither do I, for that matter. Of course, there was Martyn . . . Martyn Thorp—you never met him. He didn't last. He made a fool of himself over Roberta and cleared out."

Guen raised her eyebrows as one who said "Really! That's very interesting!" But she did not interrupt, and Allan went on. "She looked, once, as though she was getting too friendly with some awful bounder she was meeting at the Carew girl's flat. I saw him one night at some play . . . oh, an awful bounder! It made me sick Roberta should get within a mile of him. . . . He flattered her by making out he could get her some contract or other for photographs for cigarette boxes in America."

"And could he?"

"God knows!"

"And the bounder. . . . What happened?"

"Photographs, as usual. You'll find 'em in the next room. The house is becoming a blooming photographer's shop. Then one day it occurred to me that the photograph stunt was being a bit overdone. So I got her to promise to make an end of it."

"And did she?"

"Promise? Oh, yes."

"I didn't mean that. Did she 'make an end of it'?"

Allan looked at her with puckered brows.

"What are you getting at?" he said.

"You wouldn't thank me for telling you."

"I've never thanked you for most of the things you've been good enough to tell me about Roberta. This time you're trying to suggest that Roberta hasn't exactly a strict regard for truth. Is that it?"

Guen smiled.

"Few people have, you know. It's an open question whether a strict regard for truth's a virtue or not. Like punctuality."

Allan remembered the number of paltry lies in which he had already found Roberta out, and suddenly the implication of what Guen had hinted—what he thought she hinted—knocked at his brain. "Good God!" he said. "I never thought of that!"

But he had. He realised now that he'd been thinking, all the time, of nothing else. *Roberta was spending the evening with Douglas Rayne!*

"I shouldn't get so dramatic about it if I were you," Guen said. "You can't expect to keep Roberta from her chosen pals as easily as all that. She *likes* 'em. I shouldn't wonder if she didn't want a little relaxation from you . . . from us. Besides, Roberta can look after herself. . . ."

"She says she can. But can she? Sometimes I have visions of her getting herself into some impossible position."

"Oh, bosh! Anyway, you can't alter her . . . not really, not radically, I mean. You've got to learn to like her as she is."

Sometimes one got tired of sitting quiet with folded hands: one had to ram some nail or other into position; pin down some truth upon Allan's canvas of life; even if it were not a very large or important one. Allan sat up and looked at this nail Guen had driven home; this truth she had plumped down before him. And he rejected it.

"That's rubbish!" he said. "I've never seen Roberta as the Beautiful Illusion you seem to imagine. I see what she is and what she isn't. I've always done that—only you can't admit it because you've never forgiven me for not marrying Madeleine. But Madeleine never wanted me—in the way Roberta did. Madeleine's stronger than I am. . . . I'm stronger than Roberta. That's how it worked. Roberta has no moral fibre."

"I thought love made us blind?"

"It doesn't. It makes us see more—and deeper."

She looked up at him sharply, as if she had not expected him to know that.

"You're getting on," she said.

At midnight she went up to bed, and in the cold dining-room Allan kept vigil alone.

What Guen had said had disturbed him as nothing else she had said of Roberta (and she had said a good deal) had ever done before, because somehow it had never occurred to him that Roberta would deliberately break a promise. That she told lies, he knew: stupid, unnecessary lies about trivial things, like dates and times and photographs; but that was different. He had always believed her on the bigger things. She was weak, not wicked; vain, not vicious. She *couldn't possibly* be spending the evening with Rayne. For all that, the monstrous suspicion that she was stayed in his mind. He hunted it out once, but it recurred. Every moment it grew, till it filled the whole universe.

It was absurd to think that he had to sit there until she came—that, even supposing she were with Rayne, he could not go to fetch her because he had no idea where the boulder lived.

Half-past twelve came, and five minutes later the sound of the little front gate opening, shutting, and the turn of a key in the lock. He rushed to the door of the room, and for a fraction of a second he and Roberta stood looking at each other across the narrow space of the little square hall. Then Roberta turned, shut the door, put her umbrella in the stand and came past him into the room.

"I'm sorry I'm so late," she said.

Allan stood irresolute, arrested by the tired whiteness of her face, the way her ungloved hand caught at the table, as if for support. It kept him, even in that moment, from hurling his monstrous suspicion at her—the suspicion that had filled the universe. He said instead, irritably, as though her lateness had merely inconvenienced him, "Where on earth have you been?" For, now that she had actually come, his suspicion seemed as absurd as it was nasty, and the uglier things of life never went, somehow, with Roberta's appearance—but only the things that were silly or vain or capricious. Looking at her, his anger fell from him, leaving only this absurd ill-humour of the man who has been kept, unnecessarily, out of his bed.

"I've been worried to death. . . . I wish you wouldn't do this sort of thing, Roberta. It's most inconsiderate."

Roberta's left hand still clung to the edge of the table, as if

for support. With the other she dragged off her hat and began to unbutton her coat, which was very wet.

"I'm awfully sorry. I went to a party of Tommy's. I quite forgot how the time was going."

She knew at once that she had said the wrong thing. The Allan who stood there in front of her was not the Allan she knew, the Allan she had known, so far, how to manage. He had gone a step beyond her: the magic circle was broken. Something in his white face frightened her. Besides, she was feeling horribly ill. . . .

"Why do you lie to me?" Allan said quietly.

"I'm not lying."

Allan's suspicion fell upon him again—like a pall, choking him. He went forward and took Roberta fiercely by the arm, so that she cried out with the pain of it.

"Allan . . . you're hurting my arm!"

"Don't lie to me, then. Tell me the truth!"

"I have. Why don't you believe me?"

"Because I happen to know that you haven't been near Tommy Carew."

She shrank back from the thing she read in his face. In some queer fashion the room seemed to be receding: the lights swayed, grew dim. She opened her mouth to speak, but closed it again without saying anything at all. Allan's grip tightened on her arm, pulling her away from the support of the table.

"Look here, Roberta, I want the truth—now!"

"I can't . . . not to-night, Allan, please. I'm not well. . . . Let me go. . . . I'll explain to-morrow. Please let me go."

"When you've told me the truth. Not a second before. Not if it keeps us up all night."

His voice was rough, like his touch, with anger. He hated her.

"Allan . . . please. . . ."

She clutched suddenly at the table edge, missed and twisted into a crumpled heap at his feet.

Even then his anger didn't leave him. Its force crashed down upon pity and killed it. Roberta in his arms might have been a wooden image. He laid her down upon the settee behind the door and went out of the room. Guen, roused out of her first sleep by the sound of raised voices, had hurried into a dressing-gown and was already half-way down the stairs.

Speechless, Allen strode past her and went on up the stairs. She heard the opening and shutting of his bedroom door and the turning of the key in the lock.

On the dining-room settee Roberta lay still, with her head sideways against the cushions. She opened her eyes as Guen came into the room and tried to sit up. Her beauty was blurred and dimmed; its vivid streak paled and thinned.

"I think I must have fainted—I'm better now," she explained.

For a moment her hands did futile feeble things with her hair. Then suddenly she flung her arms around Guen's neck and began to cry.

"Oh, I'm so miserable!" she sobbed; "and I'm not well, and I wish I was dead!"

"Oh, nonsense!" Guen said, patting her shoulder. "You'll feel better to-morrow. One always does."

She meant, probably, that the Robertas always do.

"I shan't," said Roberta, and sat up. "I think life's beastly—perfectly beastly. And I wish I'd never been born."

"I think you'd better tell me why," said Guen, "and then have some hot milk and come straight up to bed. It's getting late."

"Yes," said Roberta; but she was a long while beginning, and what she had to say took some time because its "beastliness" clogged her tongue and brought her many times to silence.

"I can never tell Allan, never!" sobbed Roberta when what she had to say was finished. "I never meant to tell anybody—ever. It's too beastly. I needn't have if Allan hadn't known I hadn't been to Tommy's. How *did* he know, Guen?"

Guen explained.

"Tommy's a beast," Roberta said. "She's let me down properly. . . . I'll never speak to her again—never!"

"Of course you won't," said Guen. "But you must tell Allan what you have told me."

"I can't. . . . I won't!"

"Then I must!"

If she had expected a passionate protest from Roberta she was mistaken. A look of relief ran over Roberta's face, like wind over grass.

"Would you really?" she asked. "That *would* be kind of you."

"If you'd rather," said Guen.

"Oh, I would, I would! Will he believe it?"

"I think so."

Had he not foreseen this sort of thing? "Some impossible position." His own words. He couldn't fail to believe it. . . .

"Do try to make him. I wouldn't like him to think that of me. I wouldn't like anybody to. I'm not that sort. *You* don't think so, do you?"

"Of course I don't. I think you're a very stupid little person and that what you really want is a good whipping—and some hot milk."

A streak of pity flashed zigzag through the enormous contempt that filled Guen's mind. You couldn't help being sorry for anyone quite so vain as all that. She kissed Roberta and went out to get the milk.

And Roberta, having pushed the burden of her foolishness on to somebody else's shoulders, rested content. She was beginning to feel better and her beauty emerged slowly from behind the cloud of her sudden indisposition. It was silly of her to faint like that. But she had been frightened to death, what with one and the other. . . . And that lie about being at Tommy's was so silly. She ought to have done better than that. A theatre would have sounded, at that hour, so much more plausible. Then nobody would have known. She could have kept it to herself. As it was she had only herself to blame. And Guen would tell Allan. She breathed deeply at that, with relief. Guen would make him believe she was telling the truth. For she was; she hadn't done anything "wrong," but she would never trust any man again. Men were "beastly." Allan was an exception, but Allan only proved that you couldn't have it both ways. When they weren't beastly they were dull. Certainly Allan was dull. Perhaps it was the fault of the Comet; but, too, it was the fault of literature. Allan wrapped all life up between the covers of a book and it annoyed him because she wouldn't squeeze in as well. You either liked books or you didn't. And Roberta didn't. She wasn't "lit'ry." (Even now, to herself, she pronounced it like that.)

So, along the pleasant maze of her own littleness, Roberta moved again towards the comfortable thing life had been before that evening. Comfort was what she asked of life—and pleasure. Her soul—what there was of it—was made for

those things. Impinging upon reality at no point at all, it wanted only a good time and no bother and men whose admiration fell short of passion—impotent, clipped, toeing the line.

She smiled when Guen came in with the milk and the tiny soul looked out of her eyes. But Guen did not see it. Her vision had turned inwards, so that she saw again that day of Roberta's coming, through a silver mist of rain . . . over a futurist lawn. And what came later. Allan standing there in the doorway: Jan dragging Leader back into the hall; Roberta's laugh, the vivid look of her and what she said. "That's a queer name for a dog. . . ." Allan, amazingly social, moved to explain . . . and later biting their heads off, because they "discussed" Roberta. "For God's sake leave her alone!"

And they had put it on to the Comet—had not understood that there, at the very first glance, Allan had spread his dreams beneath Roberta's feet. Perhaps he had thought she would tread softly because of them. But Roberta had not trodden softly. Nobody but Allan would ever have supposed that she would.

2

It was Guen who rose the next morning and prepared breakfast. Roberta had hers in bed. Guen, too, was responsible for that. She wanted to talk to Allan.

Allan, however, when he came, did not show any great readiness to talk or to be talked to, and an abysmal gloom descended upon Guen whilst the porridge stage was reached and passed. She felt that Allan resented her appearance at his breakfast-table; resented the accident which had landed her there in the middle of things after all his efforts to keep her out of them altogether. It seemed to her that she spent an outrageous part of her life in straightening out difficult situations—or in attempting to straighten them out, for always they proved too much for her. The thing which, on paper, she could do so well, she could not in real life manage at all. This morning she had not the faintest idea how she might begin to tell Allan this thing she had undertaken; this recital of Roberta's achievement of Allan's "impossible position." And she resented the fact that upstairs Roberta sat up in bed in

a blue dressing-jacket and enjoyed her breakfast. Guen was certainly not enjoying hers, though she made a pretence of appetite while she told Allan the sordid little story she had promised Roberta to pass on. Allan said nothing till she had finished, then he pushed back his chair and got up.

"I see," he said. "I'm to believe, am I, that Roberta (having given me her promise not to see Rayne again!) went to his rooms under an assurance that Tommy Carew was to be there, whereas, in fact, Tommy was getting very drunk somewhere else, as Rayne (and Roberta) probably knew quite well. Further, I'm asked to believe that she'd never been to his rooms before except in the company of this Carew creature; that, until this evening, Rayne had always behaved as a 'perfect gentleman,' but that, finding himself alone with her, *for this first occasion*, he made her certain proposals which took her completely by surprise; that she repulsed him with scorn and fled. That's the story, isn't it?"

"Substantially," said Guen.

"Very well, I may as well say quite frankly that I don't believe it. But as a story I admire it."

"But it's exactly the sort of scrape Roberta'd be certain, sooner or later, to land herself into. You said so yourself only last night." Amazement tangled up Guen's thought. She had expected anger; she had not expected this—this staggering, unqualified disbelief, this quiet scorn that put an edge on his words.

Allan shrugged his shoulders and began to hunt for something in the leather case he had withdrawn from his pocket.

"Last night!" he said. "Oh, I'd have believed your story this time yesterday. It's surprising what a lot you can learn in a night. I'm willing to grant you one thing—that Roberta hasn't gone the whole hog; that she hasn't—to use the damnable phrase—'betrayed' me to this Rayne creature. But that, somehow, doesn't seem half so important as it ought to be. She wouldn't give *herself* to another man, but she'll give him a good deal else. Encouragement, for one thing. . . ."

"You think she has encouraged this man Rayne?"

"I don't think. I know. Roberta's virtue is coldness. Thus far and no farther. . . ."

Guen was dumbfounded—not so much by what he said as by the air of certainty with which he said it. It was as if, in

the night, he had pulled open the door of Roberta's little soul and looked in. He took something from his pocket-book and threw it down on the table. "Look at that," he said. Guen picked it up and saw that it was a photograph of Roberta. It conveyed nothing to her. As a photograph it was excellent. It showed the delicate line of Roberta's profile and the half of a rounded shoulder from which the white frock had slipped down.

"Here's another!" said Allan.

Guen looked at that, too; but her face said quite plainly that she could not see why Allan thought either of them so important. After all, Roberta was a professional photographer's model.

"Look on the back!" said Allan.

Guen looked. On both was written, in a scrawling, masculine hand, "In memory of a very pleasant evening, stolen, Thursday, December 11th, 1919. D.R."

A glimmer of understanding came to Guen.

"Who took these?" she said.

"Rayne. He's initialled his beautiful inscription. And notice the date."

"December 11th. Why, that's Roberta's birthday."

"Precisely. That fixes it. . . . I'd come home early to take her to a theatre and we quarrelled. . . . I found her out in some stupid lie and she angered me by sticking to it. I refused to go and she went off somewhere by herself. The next morning she told me she'd been giving Rayne the sitting he'd been bothering her for and that Tommy Carew was there all the time. A carefully selected set of proofs was sent me a day or so later: I needn't say that it didn't include these two. Those I found last night in an old handbag of Roberta's. . . . Oh, it's no good talking about *that*. It was just plain spying. I had to find out. . . . I can't explain. . . ."

How explain that last night he had hated Roberta in that sudden frantic way he had hated her that night of her birthday; that upstairs in his room while she slept peacefully at Guen's side, he had been torn, brutally, as he had never been torn before, by suspicion and despair? How explain, ever, that one moment of devastating insight; that stream of amazing comprehension over which the wrack of his dreams went riding?

Guen said nothing, only put the photographs down and

pushed them along the table to Allan, who picked them up and put them back into his pocket-book.

"There were other things," he said. "Letters. . . ."

"Roberta's?"

"Miss Carew's, mostly, but there was one of Roberta's to her—unfinished—and several from Rayne, addressed to her c/o Miss Carew."

"You read them?"

"I told you. . . . I was spying. I had to know . . . for certain . . . the things you've always known."

And again the conviction came to her that Allan resented her presence; not because she was an intruder, but because she could say, "I told you so!" That she would not say it, that she was very far from saying it, was not likely, just then, to affect Allan. She made a little *moue* of distaste at the trick fate had played her again. Her courage drooped as it had drooped in that pink drawing-room at Parson's Green; but this time her pride did not rise to reinforce it. Amid these ruins of Allan's dreams pride had no place. Utterly crushed she sat there, overwhelmed by her hatred of the sordid and hating herself because it affected her like that. . . .

"At least we shan't—you and I—have to pretend any longer. . . . That's something, I suppose."

She started. "How long have *you* been pretending?"

"That Roberta was straight? Oh, always—though I didn't realise it till last night. I knew there'd been men; young Ancell—Jan. (Did you ever guess that?) Oh, she was virtuous enough, if it comes to that. Men, to her, never meant anything but theatres, presents . . . the possibility of marriage. If I ever doubted it marriage reassured me. Lord, it's funny what a lot marriage teaches you."

He paused, as if to look back upon the lessons he had learned at the hands of matrimony, then went on.

"It might have been all right if I'd had plenty of money. I might then have got faithfulness . . . spiritual faithfulness. . . . I mean I might have been the last of the procession. God knows. . . . Even Roberta had her price, I suppose. I didn't reach it. . . . So she went back to the old game. . . . If Rayne hadn't turned up it would have been someone else. Only . . . I could have forgiven her if she'd left Martyn alone. . . ."

"But you can't blame her because Martyn fell in love with her."

"I don't. But I blame her for helping him; for boasting about it, for trying to keep him hanging about her when she knew what had happened; for blackening his character to me. . . . She gave me a pretty account of the story: the one that emerges from her own handwriting is a good deal less pretty, but stamped with truth. And it wasn't as if she cared tuppence about Martyn: one could forgive the big thing so much more easily. There's nothing 'big' about Roberta: she hasn't an ounce of real passion, but finds other people's useful. It flatters her to rouse it: to her it's a *sauce piquante* to life. . . . She writes to this Carew girl that she could have married Martyn as easily as lifting her little finger if she'd met him in time! And then a lot of blather about masculine morality. . . . It makes me sick!"

He began to talk with passion of the "technical morality" of the "modern girl."

"Roberta isn't 'modern,'" Guen said when he had finished. "She's as old as time. What you call the technical morality of the modern girl is the technical morality of the same sort of girl throughout the ages. Only nowadays you see it more clearly: she doesn't need to hide it so carefully."

She paused, but Allan said nothing, nor looked at her. She went on.

"Can you manage here alone for a bit? If so, I'll take Roberta down to Green Hedges for a couple of weeks. You say she hasn't been very fit. That'll do as an excuse."

Anything would do as an excuse, Allan told her. He wanted, he said, to get away somewhere alone—to think things out.

"Are you going up to see her?"

"I can't. . . . I simply can't see her—until I've grown a pachyderm. Even now, if I saw her, she'd get through to me."

Her queer fastidious look hovered for a second over Guen's drawn face.

"I don't know," she said, "what to say to you."

The instant flash of tenderness on her face as she spoke hurt him. But he went on smoking as if it did nothing of the sort.

"There isn't anything to say, is there?" he said presently.

"Nothing," said Guen, "except this. It is true, you know,

that Roberta wants looking after. I think she'll always want looking after."

"And that's to be my job, is it?"

"You took it on, dear. . . ."

"I know. But one grows tired. Besides . . ." He pulled himself up and tossed his half-smoked cigarette into the fire. Somehow, the gesture with which he did it, far more than the thing he said, showed her the truth. Also it showed her the thing he left unsaid . . . that it wasn't, quite, *this* job he had taken on. . . . Allan had never been static, but his moving on this time was astounding. It left Guen breathless; for the Allan who knew all this was a very different person from the Allan who had married Roberta. Yet, in a sense, it was still unbelievable that he who had seen so little before should see so much now, though Guen knew it was not what he had discovered last night that counted, but only that it had revealed so much that had gone before—that he'd seen and not understood. In one blinding flash, that had lit up the past, present and future, he had seen what Guen had always known; that you *couldn't* mould Roberta; that there was nothing to mould. She was merely a beautiful shell that cracked if you came too near it with the breath of passion or of truth. For that one brief moment, even as Martyn had done, Allan had seen right through her. . . .

The last thing he said to her stayed in her mind.

"Our secret, Guen. . . . Another skeleton in the cupboard."

And her reply. "Two of them. As a family, we're overdoing it a bit, aren't we?"

Her sense of humour had come to her rescue: it reached out and rapped Fate, feebly, over the knuckles.

3

When Allan had let himself out into the street Guen sat for some time before Roberta's coffee-pot and stared out through the window at the beautiful day that was climbing already out of the early morning mist. She tried to think, but her thoughts were not very useful: they seemed but to lead her to that cupboard into which they'd bundled their skeleton and to leave her there. She wished she knew just what Allan was going to do: if he was really going to lock the cupboard,

and, turning his back upon it, go on as before, with nobody any the wiser, save only themselves? Did she want that? She didn't know. She couldn't bear to think of it: couldn't bear to think of Allan going on with a thing from which the last red drop of happiness had ebbed out, into which had flowed intrigue and suspicion. Guen envisaged that with loathing, remembering again that little house at Parson's Green and the face of the man who had shown her out of it.

Suddenly she pushed back her chair, rose and went upstairs to Roberta.

And to Roberta had been given, amid so much else, the delightful gift of looking lovely in the morning. She looked so now and was aware of it.

"Well," she said, "is it all right?" "All right for me," she meant, as Guen seemed to know.

"I think so," she said, "but I want you to come down to Green Hedges with me this afternoon for a week or so. You want a holiday and it'll give Allan time to get over things."

"Allan! I like that!" said Roberta. "It's me, I should have thought, that wants time to 'get over' things."

"Well, you shall have it. . . . Do you feel well enough to get up now and help me wrestle with the chores? I've a man to see at twelve o'clock. . . . You'd better meet me somewhere for lunch and we'll catch the three-five down."

"All right," said Roberta. "But I say, Guen, do tell me. Is Allan awfully wild with me? He didn't come up. . . ."

"I think he's very tired and disheartened."

"Oh, Lord! Is that all?"

"Isn't that a good deal?"

"Not for Allan. He's always tired and disheartened about something. 'Fed up' I call it. Allan's one of those people who want to alter everything—and everybody. The world isn't a bit as he wants it. Most of the people in it are wrong, of course, and the Government's wrong and everybody reads the wrong books; or the right books for the wrong reasons—like me. And the Comet's wrong and something he calls the 'system,' and *me*. Me most of all, I shouldn't wonder. He tries hard to alter me. Wants to make me lit'ry and all that. So silly, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is," Guen said, "because you can't be altered, can you?"

"Not much. Besides, it takes all sorts to make a world, doesn't it?"

"So they say," said Guen, rather as if she thought there were some "sorts" the world could very well do without.

"I say, you *do* seem depressed!" Roberta told her. "What's up? You're not just having me on, are you? It is all right, isn't it?"

"About Allan? It *will* be," said Guen, "after a little." ("Our secret" he had said.)

Roberta frowned, and getting out of bed sat on its edge. She took up her dressing-gown from the bed rail and sat there holding it crushed up against her.

"But he believed what I *said*, didn't he?"

"In the main."

The beauty of her sitting there with that blue thing crushed up against her white skin was extraordinary. Looking at her Guen remembered something Allan had said: "I haven't yet grown a pachyderm . . . she can get at me still sometimes. . . ." She could "get" at anybody, Guen thought, a little bitterly. She could play, *in excelsis*, did she desire, the rôle of the martyred wife. Candour and innocence looked out of her eyes—and a soul. And she wasn't candid and she possessed neither innocence nor soul. But not one man in a thousand would believe it.

"He didn't think I'd done anything wrong, did he, Guen?"

"Not in the way you mean."

"Well, good heavens, what other way is there?"

"Allan seemed to think there are several."

"You mean . . . he thinks I asked for it . . . that I led Rayne on?"

"I'm afraid he does!" Guen said. "And there were two photographs . . . things you didn't mean him to see, and some letters. . . ."

"Oh, Lord!" said Roberta. "Fancy spying on me like that! I think men are beastly. I do reely. So's life. . . . Perfectly beastly."

She wrinkled her brows with disgust, and standing up began to draw the blue dressing-gown about her. She did it with an air of fastidious distaste, as if with the act she folded herself away from the essential interminable "beastliness" of men and things.

ALLAN'S interview with
same morning, for
meant to see him; even
you ought to see this man" (1)
he had found there among
he went to defend his "honor"
Rubbish! She hadn't any, and
be held to have kept his un-
reason as this that he went down
scarcely, even, was it Rayne
the real Roberta who existed so
he had woven about her; all the
illusion in which, as a natural
her. The interview with Rayne
fill in the weak places in the case
He was driven by a passion that
sessed him before: the passion
to have done with his dreams and

Even so he had not guessed
It was an extremely painful
who found it necessary to see
for Paris; but for Allan, in which
and irrevocable seemed to be
when it was —

ne else, "These poor chaps! France seems to have crocked 'em up! Not the same, half of 'em!"

Allan went out and rode on a bus down the Strand. The afternoon was beautiful. The morning's mist had rolled back from a world of quiet winter trees and brooding shadows. A red sun burned low in the sky, shedding a warm glow over the London afternoon, making even the City, which Allan detested, a thing of strange beauty.

But Allan was not looking at the afternoon, nor seeing the queer things the winter sun was doing to the Temple of Mammon. From the top of his bus he gazed down upon this carnal life of the street as upon a thing that raised its head above a whirlpool of intrigue and iniquity, having about it the fierceness and obscenity of the thing long submerged. For Allan London had become a place of Douglas Raynes, of men, suave and polished, yet furtive-eyed, loose-lipped; and of women who divided easily into two groups—the anæmic, overworked and underpaid, and the over-dressed, who lived by their power of inflaming men, within the bounds of marriage or without. It made no difference.

At Charing Cross a girl with hair bright like an aureole beneath a coquettish hat that sported an egret's feather flitted across the road and captured Allan's gaze. There was about her all the impudence and self-consciousness of youth and beauty, and the gaze of the street, as impudent as she, followed her as she went. Allan's mouth twisted into a reluctant smile because she had Roberta's carriage and flaming hair; because she wore silk stockings and high-heeled shoes with a coat of fur, and because, outside the Bureau de Change, she met a colourful youth who carried chocolates in a cardboard box and violets in white paper!

Between them Roberta and Rayne had cheapened the universe. . . . And it wasn't only that. Riding down to Kew, Allan was stunned by the knowledge that his interview with Rayne had in some queer fashion used up the last ounce of that protective feeling Roberta had aroused in him, as if, though Rayne had been thrashed, something had happened to his feeling for Roberta in the process. It lay there now at his feet, withered and dead, inspiring not pity, not sorrow, not regret, but only a vague wonderment that it should ever have existed at all.

feeling of chill detachment
conviction, somebody else's
And somebody else's wife.

He saw Roberta as, due
she had slowly but certainly
that she was vain and igno-
rational and stupid; but that
You couldn't alter her: she
vices were paltry. She had
even enough to allow her
remained paltry and venal;
hemmed in by her technical
was that Allan hated most.
could more easily have forgiven
she had done him. Or so it seemed.

But here, as elsewhere,
defence . . . He saw it varied
the bond which held her still
remained his wife, whether
not. He had no case, in the
sympathy for mental states or
black and white against an un-
Property in flesh and blood.
physical, and physically Rob-
not "given" herself or "sold"
had he, the man.

there came the sense of walking within the frame of some delicate picture, and he strode faster as if to get out of it.

A bitter disgust welled up within him. *Love! That love!* He was overwhelmed with a sense of failure—not Roberta's, but his. Mixed up with his anger, his disillusion and his disgust he recognised a grain—a very tiny grain—of pity. He ought not to have married Roberta: he could give her—had given her—none of the things she wanted, none of the things which for her made life endurable. He did not argue about her standards: he recognised them as paltry and left it at that; but the fact remained. Had he been able to give her more of the things she wanted she might not have gone seeking them in dubious fashion. God alone knew! Hers was a little soul that might yet have flourished and grown fat in prosperity: in poverty its bones stuck out incredibly. Morality for one half the world, perhaps, is only a matter of money: Roberta had her price, and most certainly Allan had not attained to it.

The path turned abruptly and ran through the broad centre of a little wood. Allan strode on, assurance beating into him. This was the end. It should not, this passionate intrusion, become permanent. It made it no better to call it marriage. Whatever you called it you couldn't make it anything else. A passionate intrusion. He wanted here, now and for ever, to put an end to it all—had finished hunting for motives and dodging regrets. Truth stared at him. He had married Roberta because he wanted her, hiding the real motive under a shoal of others less personal, less immediate, as Guen had known all the time. And Roberta had never loved him—in that way or any other. She would not mind that he put an end to it, provided she did not suffer materially. She would, he thought, wear her martyr's crown with becoming grace and dignity. Not a man, hearing the story, but would admire and pity her. . . .

Presently he stopped, took off his hat and leaned heavily against the trunk of a tree. It was as if he had come suddenly to the end of life: there was nothing beyond, and what was behind no longer mattered. It never had mattered: nothing that had ever happened to him and Roberta mattered at all; there was no meaning to any of it. He saw that, felt it, knew it for truth. The knowledge didn't even hurt. He was numb,

few yards from the public
stood there motionless: he
with intolerable pain, feeling
matter: these things which
Roberta mattered horribly. A
small and very human cri
remembered.

But one did not remember
use pretending. Things you
remembering, you forgot. Cri
and drew blood: you forgot *the*
tyn. How often in the last fe
either of them? Roberta had b
memory of them both had sunk,
How long before he should b

3

When he reached home he w
she couldn't possibly misunders
cult to write to Roberta, and ev
perhaps, that Guen would brea
him waiting a whole week for
lines of it only—and on ~~the next~~
the next

But he turned up punctually at Guen's rendezvous. She had not arrived. The day was deplorably wet and a wind like a knife was abroad . . . a beast of a day. Allan sat down at a table set for two in a corner and near to the fire. The restaurant was a haunt of writing men, and it was Fleet Street that drifted in through the door, shaking its umbrella. Two men he didn't know came and stood by the fire, warming their hands and talking . . . gravely assuring each other that they really were the only two critics in London. They possessed, so they said, a definite standard of criticism and spoke of it rather as a duchess or a cinema actress might speak of a rope of pearls which, though valuable, was always something of a responsibility. They went away presently and sat at an adjacent table, and Allan filled up time by wondering who they were. He couldn't fit them in. Then Guen arrived and did it for him. She ordered a chop with a crisp decision not common to her sex in the matter of food, and nodded affably to the Only Two Critics in London. Unaccountably nervous, Allan began to talk of some book or other Gore had sent him to review for *Life and Letters*. Guen said, "Yes, I know, it's excellent. But look here, Allan, we're not going to talk about books. I want to talk to you about Roberta."

"But surely not here. We can't possibly discuss our affairs here." A kind of panic laid hold of him.

"I fancy," said Guen, "that there isn't going to be very much—discussion."

"You mean you haven't said anything to Roberta?"

"I've said a good deal, but not about your letter."

"I see." (All right, Guen was going to stand out, too. He'd have to fight single-handed.) "I see. . . . You've come to argue me out of it—to make me see reason. Well, I may as well tell you frankly I'm not going to. Not that sort of reason, anyway. The thing's impossible. I thought you'd see that. I thought you'd agree that there's no sense in going on with a mistake—that it's better to get out while there's time."

Guen looked at him.

"I might—if there were time, but there isn't. You're three months too late."

Allan answered with an intensity that surprised himself.

long ago.

"These things happen soon smiling a little, as though she could find no words. He sat in his hands and bathed sudden emotion so keen and unexpected in his back. The blood rushed and behind his eyes that met a blonde youth at the next table on a blue and white plate. Then He heard Guen say, "That's what I wanted to be sure, and Robert

He made a great effort and said

"When?" he asked. The son him, as though he heard it for the first time.
"June," said Guen.

For long afterwards the words Allan's mind with the sight of the pie-crust on a plate, and of the ever-swinging door.



BOOK III

CHAPTER ONE

ROBERTA came home at the end of the week. The babyish look had left her face, but about her mouth was a look of sullen sweetness that, except at rare intervals, had never been there before. Allan, touched unbelievably by the sight of the first hint of her impending motherhood, had drowned the past in a stream of surprising emotion, in an overwhelming comprehension of the fact that his child—his child—must be born properly. Immediately, and with a thoroughness that to Guen was funny, he began to make a fresh lot of mistakes about Roberta. *He* hadn't been able to alter her; but Nature would. . . . The Roberta who was going through—all that—could not possibly emerge as the Roberta who had intended never to go through it. He believed, as men will, that the very fact of motherhood was potent for improvement; that it could change a woman's nature: could work a miracle more wonderful than itself. And Guen did not undeceive him.

And yet she could have done. She had only to hint at that hour she had spent with Roberta after she had seen the doctor; after doubt was no longer possible. Guen wasn't likely to forget it, but she'd keep it to herself. Not that Roberta had troubled at the first to do that. She had been at no pains to hide her chagrin, her fright. . . .

"Poor kid," A.G. had said. "If I were a woman I'd want a thousand down before I'd consider it!" Guen thought that a healthy state of mind for a man, but beneath her smile she had hidden her sense of soiled and outraged woman's dignity. One ought not to show funk over one's special job—even if one felt it.

But at that moment Roberta was hiding her funk and her smouldering anger beneath this disguise of sullen sweetness. Her imagination was not keen enough to pierce beyond the veil of the months that still stood between her and her ordeal. She lived in the present, in the Now when she did not suffer, save in her vanity, to which her condition was a constant goad. She developed a distaste for walking abroad; giving you the impression not so much of staying in the house as of hiding in it. She couldn't bear to be seen.

Yet people persisted in coming to see her. Allan's parents, Pen and Caryl, and her own father—still with that lost air which had descended upon him at the time of his wife's death. Anne Suffield, of course, was delighted with Roberta, chiefly because she was going to have a baby (Allan's baby), but also because she was having it so soon after her marriage—an old-fashioned thing to do, which appealed to Anne in the way things unexpected always did. Certainly she hadn't expected this. . . . The child she had acquired was like the children she had borne—who always did what you'd never imagined they would do. Even Pen was surprised into extending the boundaries of her affability. She came relenting, bearing gifts—the baby clothes Roberta would not make. She could not sew. From the first she said it, and to the end she maintained it. So others sewed for her. The whole feminine resources of Adelaide Lodge were laid at her feet as a votive offering. It gratified even Roberta, who loved to be the centre of attraction even in a second-rate show. It amused her to hear John Suffield dilating upon his mere-mannishness and making up for his inability to sew by paying for things which other people sewed. Allan had told her, too, that his father had made himself financially responsible for this expensive business of birth. Allan's bills were to be sent to him. He was adamant, insisted. Never was a baby to be born with so little expense to his parents. Never one born to such an inheritance of clothes. You wished at times that it was you who were first to see the light that day to come in early June. . . .

It was Caryl who said that, turning the clothes over with her hands, a new wistful expression on her face. "Wouldn't you just *love* to wear them, Berta?" And Berta said, "Not particularly, and, anyway, you wouldn't know anything about it!"

"I want to bring someone to see you," Caryl said one day towards the end of March. It was very warm and showery and Roberta lay on the settee in the window, deep in an account of the disappearance of Leonora Darbey. She looked up with a little frown at Caryl, who sat on the edge of the table swinging her feet and with much unusual colour in her brown face.

"Who?" asked Roberta briefly.

"A friend of mine—Dick Merrick."

"Oh, Caryl—a man I don't know! Of course you can't . . . now!"

Caryl stopped swinging her legs and stared at her.

"Why ever not?" she asked.

"Well . . . you might just ask yourself," Roberta said.

A faint light dawned on Caryl. "But Dick!—Dick isn't like that!" she explained.

"I don't know what you mean," said Roberta stiffly.

"Neither do I," said Caryl. But she tried to explain. "You see, Roberta, Dick's . . . Dick's awfully kind and understanding, and he doesn't care a bit what a girl looks like. . . . Oh, that sounds wrong! I don't mean that you don't look nice. You do. You look prettier than ever, somehow; but only that you needn't mind Dick. . . . Dick's rather a dear."

"Well, he'll keep, I s'pose. . . . I don't want him here now. . . . Is it the man Pen's always talking about, the man you used to meet at the Hestons? Pen always says she believes he's going to marry Marjorie Heston."

"He isn't," said Caryl. "He's going to marry me."

Roberta dropped Leonora on to the floor and begged to be told all about it.

"All" was out of the question. You couldn't possibly tell Roberta any of the things that mattered. All that about Marjorie and Dick and her own uncertainty, perhaps; that day in the wood, too. These things no longer mattered. She could laugh about them now. But she didn't laugh about that afternoon at Kew. . . . That had beauty, intimacy: it lived inside her . . . burnt up and up like a flame. She remembered it still; the unexpected meeting, down there in the Arboretum amid the scent of things that grew; their steps turning down towards the river, the January day trembling before the embrace of night and Dick's voice telling her strange things about the

wild birds that she scarcely heard because she wanted all the time to say, "Oh, don't, don't talk! . . . Can't you see I want you to kiss me again? . . ." Even now she remembered that she had been a little appalled at her own certainty.

And then, suddenly, the thing had happened. Dick stopped talking about his wild fowl: stopped, too, in his stride. Caryl had moved on—was a step in front. His hand on her arm brought her up sharply, drew her up tightly against him. She remembered what he said. "Do you want to run away—this time?" And what she said, ages afterwards: "Oh, Dick, I thought it was Marjorie! . . ."

She couldn't possibly get any of that into words, so she fobbed off Roberta with all that tosh about Marjorie and what she'd thought and not thought and about the day in the wood and at the end of it she said:

"We want to be engaged. Dick's coming to see father to-morrow. It sounds dreadfully old-fashioned, asking permission. But, you see, I promised to keep off that sort of thing until I'd got my degree, and it's eighteen months yet before I can sit for my final."

Eighteen months was an eternity. You simply had to have something to go on with. . . . They simply *must* let you be engaged. If they didn't, it was going to interfere horribly with your work. Strange how you knew that. . . .

Never for a moment did it occur to Caryl to drop the idea of her degree. She was in love with Dick, but she was still in love with the idea of her degree. Sitting there swinging her legs, she dragged out her beliefs, her modern creed—that love wasn't all. Even when you felt like this it wasn't all. There was a time when it was more important because more urgent than anything else, but that wouldn't last. Presently that bit of life would find its own level: it wouldn't obtrude. It was now—before you had had any of your things, when you faced the idea of doing without them—that they turned and crowded in upon you. This was the price you paid when you'd rejected the older creed, when you ceased to believe that when you loved nothing else mattered—that your brain could run to seed. And Caryl knew that hers couldn't. She did not believe that when a woman loved she ceased to belong to herself. . . . This horrible theory of possession! Never for a moment would Caryl subscribe to it. Yet, being woman, in love for the first

time and honest, healthy and normal, she knew the urgency of desire; was moved thereby to a sudden startling envy of Roberta, who had had things, who *knew*. . . Urged to them, too, by the sight of the pile of baby clothes at her side. Not the only thing, but horribly important while it lasted. She broke off the train of thought.

"Do let me bring Dick to see you, Berta."

And Berta snapped her up. Berta retrieved Leonora from the floor and answered, in a voice that was sharper than Caryl had ever before heard it:

"My dear Caryl, I couldn't *bear* him to see me like this. . . Really, I should have thought you would have understood."

Caryl got off the table and came over to Roberta.

"I'm awfully sorry. Please forgive me. I hadn't any idea you'd feel . . . like that . . . about it."

"Well, I do. . . It isn't very nice. You wait till it happens to you!"

The hot colour sprang to Caryl's cheek. "I'm sorry," she said again. "When is it, Berta?"

"June," Roberta said. "Two months yet."

She hung on to that as to a spar in a rough sea. She needn't think about it yet. Two full months.

But there weren't. . .

Nobody ever quite knew how it happened. Roberta herself said she slipped coming downstairs. . . Anyway, her child was born prematurely, nearly eight full weeks before she had expected it. It was a boy and delicate, who had, the doctor said, rather less than the usual chances of a seven-months' child; chances that lessened perceptibly day by day until on the fourth it became apparent he was doing nothing at all with them. As though he realised how seriously he had inconvenienced his mother, how little she wanted him, he slipped quietly out of the world into which he had hurried so indecorously.

Roberta wept.

But Allan curbed his disappointment, the pain of his outraged, newly awakened sense of fatherhood upon the bridle of his consideration for Roberta. For he thought she suffered, and he had not yet recovered from the shock of her white face on the pillow when, after that still, white night, so full of suspense, they allowed him to see her. Her eyes haunted him;

he saw in them not alone the shadow of her agony, but her implacable resentment; a resentment directed, he thought then, against fate and the fact that she had suffered for nothing. . . . It was some weeks before he discovered that even there he was wrong.

He clung at this point to his new colossal mistake, his belief that the Roberta who had suffered—that—*must* be different from the Roberta who had not meant to suffer it.

The hawthorn was in bloom before he realised that she wasn't . . . that she didn't care that her child had died; that she was, on the whole, relieved because Fate had let her off—left her free.

She was soon well again. She bloomed afresh in the world, young as the spring, and as beautiful. Still nursing his pathetic belief, still clutching his fond delusion, the lover in Allan came back again. The old ecstasy sung in his veins, the old desire reached out and stung him. He wanted her still—even far more. He wanted by his love to make up to her. . . . It wasn't merely passion: he cared with an enormous tenderness. . . .

And Roberta edged away. When Allan, refusing to be snubbed, refusing to understand, blundered after her she turned and rent him.

"I've had enough of that side of life. . . . I'm not taking any more risks of *that* sort, thank you."

Once again his dreams came clattering about his feet. Inward vision pierced him. He understood. The miracle hadn't come off—Roberta wasn't changed. Nature, neither, had been able to do anything with her. She didn't care a scrap . . . for him . . . or that her child had died. She cared still about nothing and no one save herself. The resentment he had read in her eyes, that smouldered there still, was directed not against fate, not against the futility of her pain, but against him, because he had brought her to that, had made life painful, "horrid." . . .

CHAPTER TWO

1

AT first Allan thought he couldn't bear it: that he must get up and walk out of the house altogether and never come back. But presently he knew that he wouldn't do that because he would be only more miserable away from Roberta than he was with her. In the way that mattered, the real, essential way, it was true he did not care for Roberta. But in the way that mattered only because it hurt, because he couldn't escape from it, he certainly went on caring. It came to him that it was a dreadful thing to be "in love" without loving; it meant the complete subjection of mind to body. And yet, not quite perhaps—for at least Allan recognised his malady. If he was disgusted he was also, in a sombre, mirthless fashion, intrigued by the spectacle of his own symptoms (heaven knows he considered them often enough). He was amused at the memory of his emotions on the edge of a dusky wood, at the egoism which had imagined it could wipe Roberta out, and yet but for this trick Nature had played him he still felt he might have succeeded in carrying out the part he had ascribed to himself. Even now he couldn't believe that the things which had beaten into him down there in the wood were lies. He knew they weren't, even when Roberta came back, when his soul melted in an unexpected and indescribable tenderness at the sight and promise of her. Nature had cheated him, but at least she had given him three months of the truest happiness he had known, three months in which the thought of his child had somehow purified his relationship with Roberta. He had devoted himself to her, found new queer little ways of pleasing her, of keeping her bright and cheerful. . . . And then that door shut in his face; that night, white and full of suspense . . . and, presently, Roberta's passionate distaste, "I've had enough of that side of life, thank you . . . !"

She meant it: at least there was no mistaking that. . . . No mistaking, either, his own position. He wanted to go—and he couldn't. He was bound to Roberta by this passion of the senses, by this horrible emotion of love that had, as it were, no backbone of self-respect. It wouldn't last for ever. He knew that: knew that the sort of feeling he had for Roberta was of its essence transitory. It would pass. Some day the revulsion would come; he would be free of her. But not yet. . . .

Meantime he fell back on his pride, on his work and on the barely-formed thought that Roberta some day might capitulate. . . . Even his pride wouldn't save him if she did. He knew that, too. His contempt for himself was colossal.

Much of it his work absorbed. His evenings went in the preparation of some pamphlet he had undertaken to get out for one of the many Societies he attended but did not join. He was doing it not because he cared for that sort of thing, but because it was one of the few things he could do, for though he had the reformist sense he lacked courage. The crude, ugly facts he tilted at on paper drained him, in actuality, of hope. He didn't believe you could alter things; at least not enough to matter. His sense of humour boggled at the spectacle of a world awry crying out for the man with a vision and being offered a politician with an Act of Parliament under his arm. Broadening down from precedent to precedent?—an irritating phrase that made a mere lifetime look so stupid. And people were stupid, too: even the people who suffered most, because they would not fight and distrusted change. As though some day they hoped the luck might alter; the wheel spin round. . . . Even the pamphlet he was writing would be read, Allan knew, by the wrong people. Yet he went on in a sort of hopeful hopelessness, even under the eye of Roberta's scorn and his knowledge of Guen's verdict of futility.

Somehow, here, Guen mattered most. . . . Perhaps because she wouldn't leave the subject alone. All this propaganda—bad for his art. Besides, Allan was the wrong person. In the practical world of reform you had to be hard: harder than Allan, anyway. You had to be the sort of person facts didn't hurt. . . . Whenever they met she and Allan went over the ground afresh: mentally they picked up their feet and put

them down again in the same place—an absurd proceeding, as Allan, impatient, pointed out.

"But then we *are* absurd," Guen said. "Absurd and utterly futile. None of us matter, over-much: the word 'indispensable' ought to be cut out of the dictionary. Nobody's indispensable: most of us simply don't count. We believe (some of us) in ideas, and work for our Bottomleys. We loathe Mammon, and form part of the procession in his temple. Oh, I know it's inevitable, that we can't afford to choose, can't afford to think, that if we did there'd be no place for us in the world at all. But that only makes our futility the more unanswerable. . . . I'd like to have Caryl's faith in the essential goodness and meaning of life, but I haven't got it. . . . To me, life's the one real absurdity, the ultimate outrage. . . ."

But Roberta's critical eye turned not upon life, but upon Allan who wrestled with it. She complained that he was neglecting her.

"When you've done reforming the world," she said, "p'raps you'll remember me."

"But you can't be reformed," Allan said.

"Neither can the world," said Roberta. "I agree with Guen. Much better leave it alone." (Had Guen really said that?) "And I'm tired of the sight of you sitting there write, write, write. I'm your wife . . . (she could say that!) but I suppose I don't count."

It was difficult not to hate her: difficult not to point out that she was not his wife . . . that he owed her nothing. He did hate her, sometimes; but sometimes, too, he put away his work and took her to the theatre.

Roberta was very clever: she believed in keeping up appearances, so that nobody guessed. But she was horribly dull. Tommy had gone to America. So had Rayne. Roberta had met one of the Invertebrates one day who had given her this information. She also said that Tommy had "chucked" Rayne, and seemed surprised that Roberta had not guessed that Tommy had been Rayne's mistress. "She never made a secret of it with us. I s'pose she thought you were too young to know. Not that she stuck to him or him to her . . . he was gone on *you*, once, wasn't he? Of course he *was* fascinating."

Roberta reflected that Tommy had played her a mean trick, but Tommy was good company. You were never dull with

her. She wished vaguely that Tommy had not gone to America. She wished, too, that Caryl would come in more often, and that she would bring Dick Merrick to see her. Caryl had been engaged to him a whole month and Roberta had not yet set eyes upon him. It was true that Pen in her new loquacious mood had been informative, had told her that Dick was a popular favourite, but restless. He couldn't settle down, had done nothing definite since his release from the Army, beyond taking a languid interest in one or two ventures which had come to nothing. Of course that, as Pen said, wouldn't "do." The man who was going to marry Caryl must have an assured income. Besides, it wasn't good for a man to hang about, doing nothing. Roberta had agreed. Certainly men ought to work. That was the one certain fact in an uncertain world. She never doubted it.

"Tell her to bring him to tea," Roberta said. "Only not a Sunday, because if Allan's here he'll button-hole him and I shan't get a look in."

2

May went by in her green-gold sandals and it was in the second week of June that Caryl came in, alone, to tea. Dick had gone to Sheffield: would be there a week. Caryl was full of two pieces of news. Her father had been smitten by the idea that Dick, by virtue of his Jan-like smile and his Jan-like "charm," must possess at least a modicum of his talent for extracting orders from a granite block. Anyway, Sheffield was to be the acid test: if it came off Dick was to have a junior partnership in the firm and was "settled" for life. An awful nuisance all this fuss about a proper income. . . . Her second item of news was much more interesting, Caryl thought: it was that Dick had sold his ramshackle old car and in its place had bought a motor-cycle and sidecar. Caryl and he had ideas about scouring England during the summer months.

"Well, you might begin with Number Sixteen," said Roberta. "You're a pig to keep him all to yourself."

"I know," said Caryl, "but Berta, I don't have much of him, you know—I don't really. I have to be so strict with myself—I keep saying 'no' when I'm simply dying to say 'yes'."

I simply haven't time to be engaged. . . . That's what Dick says. He's not a bit keen on my 'wotting . . . he isn't a bit 'brainy.' Yet, really, he's much cleverer than I am. He knows all the things that matter. . . . (I don't quite know what they are, but he knows them.) Berta . . . didn't you *love* being engaged?"

"Rather," said Roberta. "It's much more fun than being married! I shouldn't be in a hurry, if I were you. When you're married it's different. Marriage is *awfully* changing. . . ."

"Who changes? The woman?"

"No, the man. . . . Oh, marriage is horrid—for the woman."

"You don't *really* think that," said Caryl.

"Don't I? Nobody ever says what they think about marriage. I don't see why everybody pretends. . . . Oh, you needn't think I've been quarrelling with Allan. I haven't. I never quarrel with Allan. . . . To start with, I couldn't. He hardly knows I'm here. He's everlastingly writing. I don't mind telling you, my dear, that my life's damn dull. . . . I'd rather, any day, be back in the old studio. Marriage is rotten. . . . It's just what Tommy used to say: when you're married you're expected to be maid-of-all-work, wife, child-bearer and general cook . . . all for nothing. . . ."

"No—for love, surely," said Caryl.

"Oh, love!" said Roberta. "I don't believe in it, and anyway it's poor payment. You can't buy anything with it."

"Don't you love Allan?"

"I don't know. . . . I liked him, once, better than anybody else."

"And now?"

"Well, there just isn't anybody else. . . . I'm fed-up. Allan doesn't care about anything but his beastly writing. Write, write, write. Every night it's the same . . . as soon as ever dinner's finished."

"You should teach him better."

"Oh, I'm tired of trying. I let him get on with it. . . ."

"Don't you . . . care?"

"Not so long as he leaves me alone."

But Caryl was very far from understanding. She said:

"I know Allan can be very trying, but he's *awfully* fond of you, Berta."

"Queen Anne's dead," said Roberta. "Let's talk of something else. When will you bring Mr. Merrick?"

"Never if you call him that. He's 'Dick' to everyone."

"He mayn't like me," said Roberta.

"Why not?"

"I may bore him stiff. . . ."

"You won't," said Caryl. "I've told you, Dick isn't brainy."

"You're very complimentary, I must say!"

"Oh, I'm awfully sorry. . . . But really, you'll get on admirably. . . . You see . . . you're so dreadfully pretty." Her voice was a little wistful.

"I feel plain enough these days," said Roberta, angry that she must waste her sweetness now upon the desert air. It didn't do to flirt, even ever so mildly, with Allan, and there was simply nobody else. Some day she would hate Allan.

But except in sudden gusts of anger it wasn't possible for her really to hate anybody. There wasn't enough passion in her for that. Yet sometimes as she watched Allan's grave face bent over his work she thought, "Good heavens! I'm twenty-three! How long am I to go on with this? If only Allan would go off with some other girl . . . put himself in the wrong. . . ."

Anne Suffield noticed presently that something was amiss. She thought Roberta was restless and discontented. So dreadful for her that her child had died. . . . She had suffered terribly . . . seemed to have been plucked up by the roots. . . .

Roberta considered that a safe card to play. She didn't suppose Allan would give her away, and if he did, so much the better. . . . He'd have everybody against him. The rôle of the bereaved mother. . . . It would suit her admirably.

Allan did not "give her away." He was tired. His unsatisfied passion was wearing him out. There were times when he could hardly keep his hands off Roberta, and he hid it—not only that, but the surge of emotions that swept over him—beneath an appearance of calm so absolute that even Anne Suffield wondered if it might not be indifference. She thought Allan was rather too wrapped up in his work. "Don't you think, dear," she asked, "that perhaps you leave Roberta rather too much to herself? Isn't she, perhaps, rather lonely?"

"Does she complain?"

"Complain? Berta? Oh no, dear. I didn't for a moment mean to suggest that. . . . Only, things have been rather hard upon her. . . . Of course, she may have another child. . . ."

Allan said nothing.

"Meanwhile, dear, you oughtn't to forget how young she is . . . and how pretty."

"No," said Allan dryly. "Strangely enough, mother, that's a thing I never forget."

This sort of conversation didn't take you very far.

3

In the middle of June Antony Gore offered Allan another chance of the sub-editorship of *The Miscellany*. The sixth number was just going to press and A.G., who had other irons in the fire, wanted the bulk of the work it represented taken off his hands; for since Allan had refused at the beginning to come in he had gone on single-handed. "Ask Allan again," Guen had suggested, "I think it very likely he'll accept now." "Reasons," she said in reply to A.G.'s laconic "Why?" But she didn't tell him what they were.

Roberta was clever at keeping up appearances, but not quite clever enough, perhaps, for Guen, who had quite recently paid a visit to Number Sixteen. But Guen was right. Allan was asked and Allan accepted. When it was all over, when he had shaken hands with his chief and turned his back on the Comet for ever, he told Roberta. It was not so much that he had not meant to tell her as that, quite simply, it hadn't occurred to him. He was getting so used to ordering his life without Roberta.

And Roberta said nothing—just shrugged her shoulders as though his affairs had no interest for her, as indeed they had not. She only wanted, in her own expressive language, to "get quit" of Allan—to get out of the net. What a fool she was to have married him! When she might have done so much better for herself!

So she shrugged her shoulders at his news. . . . Really, she didn't *care* what he did. All the same, her boredom reached the point at times when she was flung back upon caring, when she had to ask him to take her out. . . . Twice in one week. (She was reduced to that! If only Tommy had not gone to America—or would come back . . . !) And on both occasions Allan refused. It was on the second that Roberta said sweetly, "I see. . . . We can't afford luxuries nowadays."

"We can afford the pit of a theatre, if that is what you mean."

"It isn't," she said. "Not the pit. . . . But if we can afford it why can't we go?"

"Because I'm too busy."

"I don't matter, I suppose?"

"Not very much."

"You're a nice sort of husband, aren't you?"

"You should know best."

"I wonder why on earth you ever married me!" she said.

"I don't," said Allan. "I know."

"So do I—because you knew you couldn't get what you wanted without."

He wanted to strangle her, but he said quietly, "You put it vulgarly but truthfully."

Roberta smiled. "And you call that 'love'?"

"There you mistake. I shouldn't dream of calling it any such thing."

"I don't believe in 'love,'" said Roberta.

"I am aware of it. That being so it's extraordinary that you should have been able to teach me so well what love is—and is not."

"Well—you *pretended* you were in love with me, anyhow."

"*In love!* That's a very different matter. . . ."

She knit her brows and passed on. "Well, you can't say I ever pretended. . . . I never told you I was in love with you. You knew I married you to get away from Manningtree Avenue and mother. Particularly mother."

"I see," he said. "Any other man would have done as well?"

"Any presentable man. . . ."

"I'm glad I came up to standard."

She laughed and came and sat on the edge of the table.

"I liked you," she said, "because you were different. At least I thought you were different. . . . You never asked me to spend week-ends with you."

"I see. I appealed as a novelty?"

"Well, I wasn't *used* to it. . . . Not *exactly*. Men are awful beasts. Even the nice ones like that brother of yours."

"He won't offend again," said Allan. "We can leave him out of it. May this conversation now end?"

"You mean I'm to shut up? My conversation bores you?"

"I mean it doesn't seem very profitable."

Roberta sat there swinging her legs, a little mocking smile on her lips.

"You think you're awfully clever, don't you?" she said.

Allan shrugged his shoulders and looked down at his unfinished work.

"I wish," he said, "you'd go away."

He looked up at her and the blood came suddenly into his face. He understood she was flirting with him; she was amusing herself, but, also, she wanted to assert herself—to prove that she still had the power to make him do what she wanted. Not that she really wanted him to kiss her: she only wanted him to want to kiss her and take her out. And only that because she was dull. Her manless world was a desert. . . .

"Go away," said Allan again.

"I shan't," she said.

He got up and came to her.

"Well?" she said. "You look very fierce."

The light, dropping directly upon her hair, called out its latent loveliness. Out of the dark green frock she was wearing her exquisitely modelled face and neck rose like a flower on its stalk. Her beauty had come back—had emerged from the mist that had shrouded it through the winter and early spring. And she had grown a little plumper. As he looked at her the old throb of the senses came back to him: his mind seemed to stop short as he looked at her. The old yearning swept over him: the old longing to see in her all he had imagined she might one day become. And then, suddenly, it had gone. He didn't care what she was or was not. He only knew she was beautiful. . . . He pulled her up against him and kissed her roughly.

"I *hate* being kissed like that," she said.

"Sorry," he said. "Go and get your things on."

He would pay for his kiss. He would pay for anything else she gave him. So much for so much. . . . He shrugged his shoulders. Well, what was he grumbling at? He'd always known that when it came to the point his pride wouldn't save him. . . .

It hadn't.

CHAPTER THREE

1

CARYL'S plan of scouring England in Dick's sidecar did not appear to mature very quickly. In the early summer Dick was out of town a good deal and on his unexpected reappearances circumstances were usually horribly against them. Once, unromantically, Caryl had a bilious attack; once, not expecting him, she had gone off to Green Hedges for the week-end, and once or twice some lecture she dare not miss got in the way. But at least she fulfilled her promise and took Dick to have tea with Roberta.

And Roberta had found him interesting. She liked the look of him, with his dark blue eyes, narrow, short-lidded like Caryl's own, giving that impression of laughter even when his mouth was serious. His features, though clear-cut, were not remarkable, save for the laughing blue eyes, to which your own always came back. He had an excellent skin, unusually fair, of the kind that tans easily, and a wide mouth, not beautiful, but with teeth that were, to redeem it. And he had charm—a stupid word that may mean anything or nothing. In Dick's case it seemed to mean good temper, a trick of making people care for him, and another of wearing the honours of his victories gracefully. Certainly they cost him little beside, perhaps, a sort of sincere insincerity. He looked happy and free, and perhaps because people are so seldom either the one or the other they loved him for the illusion. They used about him the phrase "a nice boy"; a nice boy, Guen thought, who took people (even Caryl) and things a little too much for granted, and with a gift for seeing no more than he wanted to see. She had the impression that he didn't feel very much or very deeply: as though he had not yet gone far down to the waters of life, but stood pottering about on the edge. He needed, she thought, to suffer. Even after the war and his share in it she thought that;

for the war had caught him young and had been kind. His flights over the German lines had been so many exciting adventures: no time for fear, no time for thought. Even those two crashes, of which only Caryl knew the facts, had been adventures, too—"awfully big adventures" you felt, as Peter Pan said of Death. They hadn't destroyed his nerve. He was like a schoolboy, and his imagination, if he had any, did not oppress him. Already the memory of the war was dropping from him like a cloak from his shoulders, just as it had done with Jan. Queer, Guen thought, how people could forget—what she wouldn't forget in a lifetime. She hid her envy under a moment's anger; with herself, with the people who forgot. What did it matter, anyway, what happened to a world that forgot as easily as all that?

But certainly it mattered what happened to Caryl, and Guen wondered sometimes how firmly she held Dick. Easy enough to see how firmly he held her. Yet that exhilarating sense they had of To-day, that still more invigorating sense of To-morrow, surely that ought to do something for them?

Roberta, on his first visit, though she found Caryl's beloved interesting, found him also a little disappointing. At no point during the afternoon had he shown that he was aware of her in the way that young men of his age usually were, and Roberta deserved some credit for the perspicacity which got through to the charm which, for that short interval, was certainly in abeyance. "He'd be all right," she thought, "if you could *get* at him," and the bulk of the conversation was left to Caryl while Roberta worked out the problem thus presented. Because she, most certainly, was *not* "getting at him." He seemed hardly to look at her and showed an unflattering anxiety to fall in with Caryl's suggestion that they must be getting along. It was true Caryl had said Dick didn't care what a girl looked like; but Roberta knew that if it was true of any man in the world (and she doubted it), it certainly wasn't true of Richard Merrick. Let Caryl think it, little fool, if she liked. . . . She obviously did, or she'd never let him see her in brown—the colour of all others she ought never to wear. How was it she didn't see that her particular shade of brown hair was ruined by the colour of her frock, that it robbed it of life, made it drab and uninteresting? So silly of Caryl not to be more careful!

But Caryl, ignorant of sartorial shortcomings, was oppressed by those of Dick's mood. Really, not at all a successful afternoon.

"Didn't you like her?" she asked him out in the roadway, and Dick said, "Oh, she's all right . . . not much in her. A sort of anodyne, isn't she? I mean she looks as though she'd make life practically painless. . . ."

"How disappointing you are! I wanted you to admire her tremendously. And she specially wanted to see you."

"Well, she's seen me."

"But you'll go again? You do like her well enough for that?"

"What an extraordinary creature you are! Always shoving me on to somebody else. It used to be Marjorie. . . ."

"Oh, rot!" said Caryl. "Besides, you needn't pretend it was any hardship. . . . You know you like Marjorie quite a lot. And I *did* want you and Roberta to be friends."

"You're a most unnatural creature," Dick told her as he took her arm and felt her press herself against him.

"Reason number one," she said.

"Because you're always wanting me to like other girls."

"Only girls I like. . . . Why shouldn't you? I'm not a vampire: you're too good to keep all to yourself. . . . I can't think how anybody lives, somehow, without knowing you. I don't mind sharing a little bit of you if I can have all the other part . . . the best part . . . for myself. Reason number two?"

"You don't powder your face."

"No good. I've got the sort of skin powder won't stop on. Besides, they don't make any powder that looks well on a brown skin. . . . But Roberta doesn't use powder, either!"

"*What!* You mean to say it's *real*?"

"Every bit. Oh, Dick!" (a comical look of dismay came on Caryl's face) "you *don't* mean to say you thought she made up?"

"Of course I did. Most of the complexions that look too good to be true, aren't. . . . Besides, those eyes with that skin and hair!"

Allan heard of Dick's visit with no particular interest. He did not think Dick good enough for Caryl, though he saw plainly enough what it was Caryl liked about him. He had her sense of life, her radiant happiness in the mere fact of exist-

ence. Allan granted him that, but with this difference: he cared about life because life was pleasant. Allan did not believe his happiness was innate, as was Caryl's, as much a part of her as her skin. Whatever you had or had not, there was always the coloured pageantry of life. . . . So she might have that, Caryl, in rags upon life's highway, would go blithely. But for Dick the coloured pageantry would not be enough: he would want a coloured part of his own, complete with his nicely cooked food, his assured income and his motorcycle or whatever the toy of the moment might be. He could not be happy, as Caryl could, with his eyes wide open. He'd see, Allan felt, no more ever than he wanted to see, and yet that phrase lodged in the mind. He was, quite definitely, "a nice boy."

Allan, to Dick, was a "queer fish." To Caryl he called him the Revolutionary, sniffed, as much as Caryl would allow him, at his ideas, and without knowing it paraphrased Stevenson in approval of the Allan behind them—quite mad, of course, but decent—awfully decent. Of Guen he declared he was terrified. Pure intellect, he told Caryl, knocked him flat.

"You can see her intellect sticking out of her," he said. "Just look at her forehead. It makes me want to hide."

And when Caryl said: "What'll happen when I get my degree?" he told her that she was different—that her intellect *didn't* stick out. "You don't *look clever*. You just look alive."

"Same to you!" said Caryl, and they grinned at each other, as though they knew exactly where the bond that held them was strongest.

2

It happened that summer that the Hestons abandoned the solidly-built Berkshire house they called the Cottage in favour of something they called a bungalow somewhere else, and the Suffields, tempted by the early fine weather, took it off their hands. Thither, at the end of June, Anne Suffield departed, taking Caryl and Roberta with her, because Caryl, she thought, was working too hard and Roberta looked as though she wanted a change. She did: and though it was not quite the change afforded by the Berkshire cottage, she had reached the point when anything was better than Meldon Avenue. Caryl, torn

from her work, went protesting, until Dick came home with an interregnum yawning between Manchester and Leeds and went off to Wokingham to dispose of it.

Peace reigned.

During that fortnight of Roberta's absence Allan strove resolutely to put her out of his thoughts. He was very busy. The new number of *The Miscellany* was going to press, and his pen itched to get to work on the proofs of his satires which Guen had eventually succeeded in getting him to collect. That young woman herself was in town; having fled shrieking, so she alleged, from the quiet and comfort of Green Hedges, which at times got on her nerves, as the weather will on other people's. Here, during the long July days, she worked at A.G.'s old room in Bloomsbury, and sometimes Allan took his work there in the afternoons and stayed to meet the people who dropped in later to tea.

It was not until Roberta came home that Allan realised how frequently Madeleine Hervey had been included among them. There was really no reason why Roberta should not have dropped in to tea at the Attic, but it took Allan by surprise when she did. It was the day following her return, very few people had turned up, and he and Madeleine sat together on the verandah. They had gone out there primarily because of the heat; but it wasn't always the heat which explained why they paired off together in this fashion. The truth was they were getting into the habit of sitting themselves down together in some corner and forgetting the rest of the company, although this, too, Allan did not realise until Roberta, not by anything she said, but by her very presence, had drawn his attention to it. Her eyes had taken them in as she entered the room; not only the close-drawn intimacy of their chairs, but the eager glow upon their faces as they talked; the obvious air of having forgotten their surroundings. But she refrained from coming out to them and made herself amiable enough to Miss Hardwick and the gentleman with knee-breeches, who got on with her admirably because he could see that she had a beautiful face and guessed that she was stupid. He was essentially the sort of man who was never really at home with a woman unless he could, ever so faintly, despise her.

Roberta and Madeleine had never met since that first afternoon eighteen months ago at Teddington, but when Allan came

into the room and brought Madeleine over to Roberta, that young woman was affability itself.

"Of *course* I remember you," she said. "You came to tea, didn't you? And you had a headache. Isn't this a nice room?"

They abandoned Allan and walked round together looking at it, and as his eyes followed Roberta (as did the eyes of all the other men in the room) he realised with something akin to dismay that she had not done with him yet nor he with her. Even now, with a single turn of her lovely head, she could possess him anew. The beauty to which a year ago he had surrendered held him still, and not all his knowledge of the poverty of mind and spirit behind it could make it otherwise. She had nothing to give that was worth while, but there were still to be times when he would relinquish everything for just that something worthless she had it in her power to bestow. Some day that might no longer be true, but it was true now. He was as far as ever from opening the door and walking out, and that feeling of dismay came to him again as he realised how much more difficult it was going to be now to keep things up—to play Roberta's game as he had played it for the past two months, though heaven alone knew how or why or what he hoped to gain by it. At least their life together had flowed along on a semblance of amiability. They had few open disagreements. He had been able to go on with his work and had lived for a whole fortnight without her. It had looked like a triumph. . . .

And he saw now that it wasn't, for here was Roberta again, beckoning him with the colour and grace and sheer delight of her. So markedly had she the appearance of possessing all the feminine graces, it was difficult, even now, when his passion no longer deluded him, to realise that they all belonged to her body—that her soul was lean and angular.

3

At the corner of the Tottenham Court Road Allan refused Guen's invitation to go off somewhere together for a meal and climbed with Roberta into a North London bus, which was crowded, so that they had to strap-hang. And Roberta, leaning to Allan, expressed her chagrin that he should not have accepted Guen's offer.

"If you're going to work all the evening," she said, "it won't be very lively for me, and as Miss Hervey would have been there too I should have thought you'd have jumped at it."

He looked at her. She smiled.

"Oh, it's all right. I'm not jealous. After all, she's your sort. . . . I don't blame you. You ought to have married someone lit'ry. . . ."

"Two, please," said Allan to the conductor, and was astoundingly grateful to the young man in the corner who at that moment caught sight of Roberta's face and rose to give her his seat.

Left to his thoughts and his strap, Allan wondered for just one second why he should have received the impression that Roberta approved of this friendship with Madeleine Hervey—that she wanted, for some reason or other, to encourage it. And then the thought rode out upon the tide of his gratitude that at least she had not objected—that she had not pushed Madeleine with wifely determination into the background. He tried to think what he would have done if she had . . . what, too, he was going to do when Guen went back to Green Hedges and these afternoon meetings with Madeleine came to an end. Somehow this afternoon his friendship with her seemed like a tonic after the fever of his passion for Roberta. It was as if his year with Roberta had drained him to the dregs, emptied him of strength and vitality: as though Madeleine, with her quiet eyes, her restful presence, poured strength into him again, making him whole, building up his self-respect. Her attraction for Allan was, so far, a purely sexless thing, for in Madeleine, as in Caryl, sex did not flaunt itself. You desired her not as a woman, but as a human being. She was devoid of tricks, and if she had beauty it was not of the devastatingly feminine kind. That, perhaps, was a virtue you could not wholly appreciate unless you had lived with Roberta. But Allan had. . . . Strange what a lot of things Roberta had inadvertently taught him: but nothing, surely, as strange as this, that she should have shown him the beauty of Madeleine's friendship and his own poignant need of it.

CHAPTER FOUR

1

CARYL came back from Wokingham with a cold, a general inability to work, and evasive replies about her holiday. She brought back, too, a strange un-Caryl-like reserve alternately shrouded and revealed by the air of smouldering excitement which hung about her. She went often to Meldon Avenue, so often that when she could forget how much time it took up, how much study it dissipated, Anne Suffield smiled with approval, for she still thought Allan did not realise how much he left Roberta to herself; how few friends she seemed to have.

Yet even with Roberta Caryl preserved her odd new manner of excitement. She talked less or she talked too much, and occasionally she flashed out something which betrayed the trouble beneath, or would have betrayed it to anyone but Roberta. There was the morning she came in upon that young woman struggling with the aftermath of the washing of her hair. A red-gold mop, it hung drying upon her shoulders. Caryl had thrown herself down in a seat by the window, talked of a thousand and one things that didn't matter and then, suddenly, had said the one thing that did. "I wish I'd let *my* hair grow, Berta!"

And Roberta had said, "Now don't be soppy! You only say that because Dick said those silly things that day I washed my hair at the Cottage."

"What day? I don't remember," Caryl said in the new evasive way that had come to her of late.

But she did remember. The whole scene rose up now before her. . . . Dick running his fingers through Roberta's hair and turning to Caryl with a little laugh. "Why didn't you ever let *your* hair grow, Caryl? I wonder what you'd look like with long hair?" And Caryl (she remembered this, too) had grown

very hot about the face and said, "Oh, much the same, I expect!" But later, upstairs in her own room, she had looked at herself critically in the glass and clenched her hands. "It's true," she had admitted. "It's damn monotonous, this short hair! . . . There's never any surprise in it!" And she had remembered the surprise in Dick's face when he had come in and seen Roberta sitting there before the fire. . . .

She had stayed up there in her room, half-sick with misery: not understanding quite why it assailed her, but understanding enough, anyhow. Beside Roberta she was so *plain*. She *felt* plain. . . . It wasn't that she felt jealous of Roberta: it was only that Roberta showed you, somehow, the enormous possibilities of the human face. You were crushed by the knowledge of your own limitations just when you wanted to look your best. Caryl remembered that impulsive cry of hers to Guen, that sudden frantic longing after an "harmonious" face, and Guen's laugh as she drew her "unwarrantable conclusions" ("You should take the precaution of falling in love with a man who never looks at faces!"). It was impossible to believe there were such men. *All* men looked at faces. Faces mattered to them tremendously. You might despise them for it, but you couldn't alter them.

To-day she paused in her admiration for Roberta's unbound hair to remember that little twinge of pain she had suffered when Dick had admired it a few yesterdays ago. And not only the incident of the hair, but something that had belonged to the evening that followed it.

They had started out, the three of them, for a stroll, and at the last moment Caryl had run back to change a shoe which was chafing her heel. There was a knot in one of the laces, which delayed her, so that when she got down to the gate Dick and Roberta were out of sight. They had not said in which direction they were going (Caryl was positive about that), and she set off along the route of a walk she and Dick most favoured, which they had named the Triangle. But a quarter of an hour's brisk walking failed to bring her on the heels of the earlier starters. She stood by a field gate and considered the situation. "This is absurd," she thought; "they might have waited a minute." She didn't see how they could have come this way, for the road ran straight from the point at which she stood, and had they been in front she must have seen them. It wasn't

le they had reached the little wood where you turned
id came back along the third side of the Triangle. She
it wasn't possible and yet she went on. She came to the
wood, pushed open its swing gate and slammed it after
If they had really come this way; if they were actually
there in the wood, they would hear that and wait for her.
hey weren't in the wood: that was soon apparent. She
he wood to herself—she and the birds and the sunset.

d in the wood she sat down on a fallen tree trunk, not
ag at the sunset and desperately inclined to tears. She
ired; her shoe was chafing her heel again, and—Dick and
rta had taken her beautiful evening and annihilated it.
Caryl hated them for it. She hated Dick and Roberta.
e sat in the wood a long time, but presently she got up
went on along the path out on to the hill from which the
road, curving and curving, led eventually home. She had
ed slowly, not alone because her foot pained her, but
se she did not want to hurry: she did not want to meet—

. The sunset had flickered out in a palely-reflected
n light through massed trees there at the top of the hill
id her, and up the darkly-blue sky a yellow moon came
ing slowly. The fragrance and sweetness of the July
stabbed into her, so that her dull, inexplicable misery left
She took off the shoe that was hurting her, and then the
l roadway hurt her instead. She took off the other shoe
walked on the grass that edged the road. There was a
dew: it came through her thin stockings and drenched
eet. When she got home she would have a hot bath and
raight to bed. She must remember that: a summer cold
so hateful. . . . But she didn't remember, for as she came
the gate of the Cottage Dick moved out of the strong light
e hall into the soft darkness of the night. A little behind
Caryl could see the gleam on Roberta's wonderful hair.
's voice rang out.

Where on *earth* have you been? We waited hours down
by Walling's Farm."

ryl stood still at the gate. The moonlight seemed to be
ng Dick's face very white. "I never dreamt you were
; that way," she said. A cold hand had clutched at her

berta's voice from the doorway:

"But we *said* that way. I called out to you. . . . Don't past Walling's. . . ."

The cold hand became a red-hot iron. Her voice rang with the pain of it.

"None of us said which way we were going. But of course I thought we were going the Triangle walk. Why, Dick and I *always* go that way. . . ."

Dick's voice again:

"I'm awfully sorry, old girl. It never occurred to me. . . . It's miles round by the wood. I thought we were just going for a stroll. Really, I'm most awfully sorry."

He had forgotten *her* walk . . . *their* walk . . . the walk they had taken together hundreds of times, to which when they agreed upon a walk their feet turned instinctively. Extraordinary how a thing like that could hurt. Caryl swept on into the house, past Dick, past the glowing, radiant vision of Roberta in the doorway. In the hall she stopped to hang up her hat. There was a queer burning sensation in her throat and at the back of her eyes. Her voice slipped in like a knife between Dick's explanations and Roberta's apologies.

"You needn't explain or apologise," she said. "You did it on purpose."

For a second she stared at them, head up, eyes flashing, holding her shoes in one hand by the laces. Then with one swift movement she dropped the shoes and ran quickly up the stairs into her room.

Later, Dick tapping at her door and his voice, pleading, "Caryl . . . let me in, darling." And the sound of Caryl's sobs filtered through the doorway even while she hardened her heart and would not let him in.

In the morning she went downstairs and apologised. She had a cold and a blistered heel, but neither mattered because Dick was so penitent and suggested running over to Henley and spending the day on the river. . . .

Roberta was very sweet about it. She accepted Caryl's apologies and effaced herself quite beautifully and humbly. Caryl felt she had been horrid to her—simply horrid. And she bore her no grudge at all. Her self-effacement was complete.

And not on that Henley day only, but for the remaining evenings after dinner. Three of them—sweet enough, you'd have thought, to have wiped out the memory of that other

h had been so singularly unsuccessful. You'd have sworn d forgotten all about it. And yet, here you were, remembering it again this morning. Caryl took herself sharply to

How long is that hair going to take to dry?" she enquired. It's nearly dry. Why?"

Well, can't we go out? I can't work—the weather's too or something. . . . Do come!"

othing loath, Roberta went off to get ready, and Caryl sed herself by looking at the current copy of *The Miscel-*, which contained a review by Guen of somebody's book a sonnet of Allan's about a view from a hill and what said to him" as they sat there looking at it. Caryl d it.

oberta came down drawing on her gloves. ("Gloves on Heath!" thought Caryl. "Oh, fair, fat woman, whom dy loves. Why do you walk through the fields in gloves?") n Allan's poem?" said Roberta. "The girl in it's me." Oh, rot!" said Caryl politely.

oberta laughed.

Fact. . . . I always say the wrong thing, you know. I get Allan's nerves most horribly, shouldn't wonder. . . . He at to have married someone lit'ry—like that Miss Hervey." I think it's perfectly beastly of you to say things like that," yl flashed out.

Why not—if they're true? . . . Of course, it's awfully nice ou to stick up for me: but, well, I'm *not* the sort of wife Allan." Roberta looked at Caryl out of pathetic hazel . Her mouth quivered. "People who write ought to marry ple who write . . . or people who understand what they e, anyway. Of course, if you've got plenty of money it n't matter so much."

I don't see what money's got to do with it."

Oh, well, you would fast enough if you were married. . . . ean, if you've got money you needn't be lonely. . . . You go about on your own."

Are you lonely, Berta?"

Well, I should be . . . rather . . . if it weren't for you.

I don't blame Allan. After all, birds of a feather, you w. . . . It's only natural. If I were Allan I'm sure I

should want to talk to Miss Hervey quite as much as he does."

"But how often does Allan see Madeleine?"

"Oh, only at Guen's tea-parties, I s'pose. . . . I don't know. I never ask; but he goes there every afternoon now Guen's at the Attic. . . . Oh, I don't mean he goes to see Miss Hervey. But it takes up time, and then when he comes home he has to work in the evenings, and whenever I suggest going out he can't spare the time. . . . It isn't exactly lively, for me. . . . However, are we ready?"

They were and they set out. Caryl was very talkative on the way down to the tube; but her thoughts moved as quickly as her tongue. She was thinking that it was a shame if Allan was really being beastly to Roberta; if he was neglecting her . . . making her unhappy. These writing people! How absurd they were—always imagining that nothing mattered except the making of books and articles. Books were all right in their own way, of course, but they were, at bottom, a bloodless substitute for life. In a stupendous assembly of books, the sort of sight you stared at in the Reading Room of the British Museum, there was something positively indecent. Anton Tchegov was right when he said in one of his letters that to have at the end of life nothing but a collection of books was horrible. . . . One could read Tchegov because he didn't attempt to squeeze all life between the covers of a book, because he knew it couldn't really be done. Besides, there were enough books in the world already; Caryl could see no reason at all for adding to them. And that Allan could was no reason at all for making Roberta unhappy.

2

For a week Caryl did little work, devoting herself to Roberta, until a word from her mother (who thought she was overdoing it) pulled her up. She settled down then and did a fortnight's solid reading, whilst the weather broke up and became wet and cold, and plans for week-ending at the Cottage came to nothing. Dick was somewhere in the Midlands, where it rained (so he wrote, despondent) everything but orders. Then suddenly the sun appeared, briefly beautiful, and with it a letter from Dick announcing his return on the Saturday. Caryl received the letter on the Thursday evening, and on the

Friday afternoon she put away her work and went round to Meldon Avenue to see if Roberta was at home and if she'd come out somewhere and have tea. The sun and the promise of Dick seemed altogether too much that afternoon for Caryl. Work became suddenly impossible.

Roberta was at home. She came to the door, flushed and beautiful and in one of her nicest frocks. "I thought you were hard at it!" she said. "Guess who's here?" "Can't!" Caryl said and then her eyes fell upon a pair of gloves upon the table in Roberta's hall. She picked them up and looked at them.

"Dick!" she said and felt the colour flaming in the face she turned enquiringly towards Roberta.

Roberta nodded. "I ran into him to-day coming along to you. I said he'd catch it for coming home before time and disturbing you. . . . He said he hadn't thought of that . . . that he'd better take the jigger back and go off somewhere on his own. . . . I asked him to come in for tea . . . he wouldn't until I said you might drop in before he went. I thought the sun might tempt you out. . . ."

"It did," said Caryl, oppressed, somehow, by Roberta's volubility. Something had gone wrong with her voice. She couldn't control it. She was horribly aware that Dick had come out of Roberta's little drawing-room and was coming towards her. She didn't move; but all her being quivered with the sense that flooded her that he had been standing just inside the door of the room, listening to what Roberta had said. It was as though he had been waiting in the wings for his cue.

"We never *really* thought you'd come!" said his voice behind her. She made a superhuman effort and turned to face him, her hands clenched tightly against Roberta's hall table. The colour had faded from her brown face, her eyes were surprisingly bright, her chin had an angry tilt.

"I'm quite sure you didn't," she said.

"Oh, don't be ridiculous, Caryl," Roberta said. "Come and have some tea."

She led the way into the room where across a chair lay a close-fitting hat and veil of Roberta's and on another Roberta's shower-proof coat of rust red. Without a word Caryl crossed to the French window, opened it and stepped out into the garden, and there, by Roberta's kitchen door, stood Dick's

motor-cycle and sidecar. Gazing at it Caryl lived through an awful moment. Her world rocked. It wasn't true. It simply wasn't true, this story they had told her.

Whether Dick had come home early by accident or by design this afternoon's encounter was no accident. Dick and Roberta were going out together. That was certain. If she had been half an hour later they would have been gone and she would have known nothing about it. Here was Dick's sidecar and there, in that room, where they expected her to have tea, were Roberta's hat and cloak—the little close-fitting hat and veil and the rainproof coat which on a day like this Roberta would never have worn if she hadn't been going in the sidecar. And that pretty frock of Roberta's—would she have worn that if she hadn't been expecting Dick? Three weeks since Dick had gone away and on his return he comes straight to Roberta. He gave her this first afternoon: this first afternoon of sunshine. . . . Oh, she simply couldn't bear it. What did it matter whether Roberta's story of her meeting with him was true? What *wasn't* true was that Roberta had beguiled him with thoughts of Caryl—with the hope that he might see her without having it on his conscience that he had "disturbed" her work. *He hadn't wanted her to come.* She was horribly certain of that—with the hideous finality of certainty that leaves you quivering as from a physical blow. She turned and walked back into the drawing-room.

Dick was there alone. He stood by the mantelshelf, hands in pockets, looking glum. Caryl came in and sat on the arm of a chair in the middle of the room.

"Do you usually take the sidecar away with you on your business expeditions?" she asked.

Dick looked at her.

"Don't be idiotic," he said shortly. "I went home and got the beastly thing on purpose to take you out."

"Or Roberta?" said Caryl.

Dick came over to where she sat and put his hands on her arms. She could feel his fingers, warm and deliberate, through her thin voile frock. His eyes had not lost their lurking suspicion of a smile: they seemed now to be smiling down into her own—pathetic, appealing—as she sat there, with his hands upon her, her shoulders drooping with the blind, swift misery that had descended upon her.

"You blessed idiot!" said Dick.

She dropped her face against his arm. He could feel her

kissing his sleeve, pressing herself against it. She was not crying: save for that passionate pressure against his arm—that caressing movement of her mouth—she was still as a stone.

"It's all right," he said, "it's all right."

She stood up and stared at him out of tragic dark eyes.

"Dick—I must go home," she said.

"Without any tea?"

"Tea? Oh, Dick, I couldn't. . . ."

The expression in her eyes baffled him, and he wished she'd stand up straight in that arrow-like way he had always thought a part of her. Even while he thought it she did it. He held out his hand and drew her to him. He felt her elusiveness—had an air of gathering it and her up together. She shut her eyes and endured his kisses, unresponsive.

"Dick . . . I want to go home," she said when he'd finished.

"You shall . . . when you've kissed me."

"I can't . . . not now. . . ."

She was standing straight again: still darkly tragic her eyes met his.

"I'm going home," she said, "now."

"It'll look so absurd. . . . Berta's getting tea."

You could hear her at it in there in the kitchen. Caryl shook her head.

"I must go home," she said. "Don't come, please. . . ."

"Not come? Of course I'm coming. Don't be an ass." He stood in the doorway, barring her exit. Her head went up.

"Dick, please . . . I can't *bear* it if you come."

"Aren't you being rather idiotic?" he asked her.

"Probably," she said.

He lowered his arms and let her go. He watched her walk down the narrow hall to the front door. She opened it and was gone. She had left him . . . in there . . . with Roberta . . . to have tea. Why not? Wasn't that why he had gone there?

Was *it*? Did she really believe it? She didn't know. She didn't see how she was ever going to know. And then the thought, hot and biting, like acid dropping on her heart: "How can I go on—if I *don't*?"

Tea was over when she reached Adelaide Lodge, but Alice brought up a cup to her. She drank it and sat there over her books until the soft gong in the hall announced the serving

of their evening meal. She brushed her hair, averting her eyes from the cartoon above her dressing-table of the Young Person Who Means To Be Happy, and in her crushed voile frock went down to the meal and the inquisitorial gaze of the family and its interest in her afternoon.

The first five minutes were a blur, in which she heard herself saying that Roberta *had* been at home, but was engaged and couldn't come out. Pen said, "*Engaged?* Oh, too busy to come out. That didn't sound a bit like Roberta. . . ." And her mother: "You couldn't have gone far, dear. Oh, yes, it lasted out the sunshine, if it comes to that. Artichokes, dear?" Tom passed them to her. She shook her head. "I hate artichokes . . . such an absurd name for a vegetable!" Tom grinned. What time was she expecting Dick on the morrow? She wasn't. "He'll just come," she said. "His letter only said 'Saturday.'" Tom Warren winked solemnly across the table to her father, as one who said, "These young folk! And calling themselves *lovers!*"

Oh no, they hadn't guessed. They'd never believe she cared as much as this—so that it hurt in this appalling fashion even to sight the possibility that *he* cared less. . . . Desperate, she dragged the truth out of the corner of her mind in which it was hiding and looked at it. What hurt her most was the thought, nay the fear, that Dick had lied to her, that he had *really* been waiting there to get his cue from Roberta. She wanted to know if what Roberta said was true—if he *had* encountered her by accident on his way to Adelaide Lodge or if he—and she—had "arranged" it all beforehand. Hateful that she should suspect it: she wouldn't have done but for that evening of the walk. Impossible to sponge some things from your mind. They left a smear. . . .

That Dick could lie and deceive! Unthinkable! Yet here she was, thinking it. She would not. But to-morrow Dick would come—and she would know. But supposing he came to-night? He wouldn't. Officially he was still in Manchester. Besides, he'd leave her alone. She was certain of that—yet not too certain. "I couldn't see him here . . . to-night. . . ." Certain of that, anyhow. She couldn't face it. She gulped her coffee, ran upstairs for her hat, called Leader and announced she was going out to walk upon the Heath. If Dick came she wouldn't be there.

He didn't come. They would have told her if he had. And no word in the morning. But at three o'clock the sound of his cycle in the road, his voice in the hall and the sound of Alice laughing as she shut the door upon him. (He was like Jan—he could always make Alice laugh!) Caryl was there in the drawing-room with Pen and her mother. She had on a buttercup frock of some uncrushable material (that beastly crushed voile of yesterday!) and in a passion of self-glorification she had that morning washed her hair. It stood now like a thick dark shield about her head, with that suggestion of fluffiness, that subtle hint at a wave that redeems straight hair from the charge of lankness. She had not slept last night and her eyes were shadowed, but beneath the clear olive of her skin waved the red banner of her inner excitement. At the sound of Dick's arrival she looked up from her book, hesitating, lips slightly apart, a tiny frown beneath the straight line of fringe, and while she waited Alice put her head in at the door.

"Mr. Merrick, Miss Caryl. . . ."

Caryl got up and went out as one going to execution.

Dick wasn't in the hall; he was out there in the road doing something to his machine. She moved forward down the steps, because out there, she knew, he would not kiss her—for "all the neighbours to see." In his sudden, easy fashion he turned and smiled upon her.

"Hallo!" he said.

She thought: "It *can't* be true if he can look at me like that, and then: "But if he *were* lying, that'd be part of it . . . that open frank look. . . ."

She said: "Are we going out?"

"Kew, I thought."

He had turned back to his engine that was making queer, excited noises, so that he didn't see the way she bit her lip or the little spasm that crossed her face like a shadow on a blind. There was nothing about her "Right-o!" to show what it was going to cost her, this afternoon, to go to Kew. Because Kew was bound up with the magic of a late February afternoon, with the river slipping past the reeds and the hand of evening already in the sky. . . . The picture built itself up anew in

her mind. How could she possibly bear it—this visit to Kew—this afternoon?

"Will you put your things on? We ought to get off pretty soon while the fine day lasts. It'll rain before long."

She turned from him and went back into the hall. He did not come in—stayed there still fiddling with his engine until she had gone up to her room. She knew exactly when he came in. The sound of his voice floated up to her from the drawing-room . . . with Pen's laughter, that ran up and down the scale, like the thing of joy it was; and the little pause which meant that her mother was speaking. Anne Suffield's voice did not penetrate: she had that low, sweet voice the old-fashioned man found excellent in the woman of yesterday and misses in her daughters.

Caryl, summoning her courage, went down presently, stood inside the door and said, "Ready!" The veil she had tied over her little straw hat seemed to give her a fictitious confidence, for through its mesh her eyes met Dick's, smiling at her above a mouth that was serious. "You want another wrap," he said. "It'll be cold before we get back." Through the tulle veil her lips demurred. After all, it *was* July!

"Only by the calendar," Dick said, holding the door open for Anne Suffield going in search of a silk scarf of her own.

Pen and her mother came and saw them off—watched Dick tucking her into the sidecar, coaxing that devil, his engine, running beside it in encouragement, jumping into his seat. . . . Neither spoke as they turned a bend in the road and were out of sight. The engine saw to that. And Dick's speed. . . .

This afternoon he went faster than ever. He rode recklessly, as though he rode away from, rather than towards, something. Caryl, looking at the straight line of his profile, saw that his gaze was fixed upon the road ahead, his mouth set in a grim line. Even to-day she wanted to smile, because his eyes were so like a cat's whiskers—they seemed to tell him just where he could squeeze through an opening and when he couldn't. The deadly precision of it enchanted and fascinated her: conversation was out of the question. Besides, even if she had thought of anything to say beyond the "Dick—it's simply marvellous how you do it" that rose to her lips, she'd never have said it. Dick hated the girl who talked while he steered her through London traffic. "Marjorie jabbers," he had said

once to Caryl. "No pleasure to take her out in the old jigger. She'd enjoy a bus-ride as well!" You weren't likely, after that, to catch Caryl "jabbering." Even when they turned off over Hammersmith Bridge and were stopped by a policeman she didn't open her mouth. The constable had given Dick a friendly warning that he was exceeding the speed limit, and Dick had evinced an intense surprise. "Good girl!" he said as he rode on. Not to have given him away, he meant, by so much as a smile. But she smiled now, though briefly, for the thought stung. It had happened before: Dick was always exceeding the speed limit and was constantly being warned by friendly constables. Always he assumed that air of innocent surprise, of bland blindest astonishment. And always the constables were taken in. It had amused her before, but to-day it didn't amuse her at all, because she could think of nothing save that if he could do it here—where, after all, it didn't matter—he might do it where it did. And you'd never know—any more than the constables—that he was deceiving you.

The road to Kew wound by the river, and though Caryl loved the river she scarcely saw it this afternoon, for her vision had turned inwards and she saw nothing but the fear that looked at her—the fear that, after all, she wasn't *going to know*. With cold fingers that thought seemed to be pushing her out of a friendly world into a region where you were sure of nothing—believed in nothing. . . .

Then, at the last, in the Kew Road, sanity opened the door of her misery and looked in upon her. Dick had stopped—was there at a greengrocer's buying her cherries.

"I'll put the jigger up here!" he said, coming over to her with the bag in his hands. "White-hearts. Real beauties. . . . Think we'd better carry the rug, the grass may be damp. No . . . you're going the wrong way . . . three doors to your left. That's it. Sign of the 'Shell.'"

Returning sanity pushed wide the door and came right in. Caryl stood there by the garage door listening to what Dick was saying to the man in charge. "Oh . . . about six . . . no thanks . . . running splendidly. . . ." When he came back she put her hand through his arm and walked along towards the Cumberland Gate. There they paid their pennies and walked in past the high wall to a spot they knew to which

few people came. Folk came to Kew to look at the roses . . . to see the "houses." The uncultivated parts you might have, an' you would, to yourself. And Dick and Caryl went to them as a matter of course, their feet turning instinctively along by the wall. . . .

4

And down there under the trees Dick made his acknowledgment of the need of confession. . . .

Caryl, propped up on her elbows, kept her face turned slightly away from him, the business of taking two bites at a cherry seeming to absorb all her attention. Presently her head bent lower. She was not eating her cherries any longer, but making tea-pots of them, twisting and detaching their stalks artfully to form handle and spout—a form of industry that seemed to require much care and attention.

Dick was a long time beginning. Caryl had a sense of him lighting a cigarette; of his arm sweeping out to throw the match over her head . . . and then what he said seemed to blind her. She was stunned. The cherry stalk broke in her hands. She sat there, a cherry in each hand, what he had said ringing in her ears.

"Darling . . . it wasn't quite true . . . all that about yesterday!"

Suddenly strength came to her. She lifted her head and looked at him.

"You mean . . . you *hadn't* met Roberta . . . accidentally . . . you'd *arranged* it?"

"Good God! You think *that* of me?"

If he had amplified that exclamation, embroidered it with self-pity, she would have flashed out, "Why shouldn't I? Why shouldn't I have thought of it?" but the plain unvarnished statement stopped her. Something in the ring of it and in his face hurt her. She hadn't known that anybody's face could hurt you. And this was Dick's. . . .

She looked away, not speaking.

"You don't think so now?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Not now," she said. She was miserable and covered with shame because she had misjudged him. She was sure of that before he had spoken a word. "Not now," she repeated, as

though the repetition was a thing she owed him—a sort of insufficient reparation. Something humble and childlike looked out of her eyes as she waited for him to speak. He did presently, not looking at her. It was quite true what Roberta had said. Coming back a day earlier than he expected from Manchester, he *had* been coming on to see Caryl: he *had* encountered Roberta in the High Street; she had alleged Caryl to be “swotting” and had invited him to tea.

“I refused. . . .” Dick said. “I said you’d think it unkind. She accepted that. . . . We stood there talking a little while and she told me there was an account in the *Star* she’d just bought of the death of some young man she used to know. Thorp, I think his name was. He was killed while out shooting game. She seemed very upset. . . .”

Six cherry tea-pots, now, in a neat row. Thorp? Thorp? went her brain. Oh yes, the young man Allan and Roberta had met at Shanklin. . . . Caryl had seen him once: tall, dark and with Dick’s air of saying, “I’m so glad I’m alive! Life’s so jolly, don’t you think?” Horrible to think he was dead!

“We walked back towards Meldon Avenue. I didn’t think about it . . . you know how you do that sort of thing mechanically. She talked about young Thorp . . . they were very good pals, apparently—she’d missed him no end. And I remembered that letter of yours about her being lonely. You remember? Anyway, she said she *was* lonely . . . that the Revolutionary that night was going out to dinner. She’d gone out to buy a paper because the house was getting on her nerves. . . . And then she’d seen the report of Thorp’s death. . . . It must have been while we were standing there that she renewed the invitation to tea. It seemed so silly to make such a fuss. I thought I could come on to Adelaide Lodge directly afterwards. . . . Anyway, I went . . . took the old jigger round the back—for safety. Really, Caryl, that is just how it happened. I swear it, dear.”

By the simple expedient of lengthening its spout Caryl was thoughtfully converting her sixth cherry tea-pot into a bronzitis kettle. Suddenly she looked up from it and smiled.

“I believe it,” she said. “Let’s chuck it, shall we? I’ve just been a fool, that’s all. Let’s forget it.”

“But I haven’t finished. . . . You’ve got to understand that

I didn't go in to have tea with Roberta because I thought you might run in. . . . I didn't believe you would. . . . And I didn't go because—or not only because—I was sorry for Roberta. Besides, I didn't stay sorry for her. . . . You see, it struck me she couldn't be so very cut up about young Thorp because directly we got in she went upstairs and changed her frock. . . .”

Caryl's eyes were looking at him with a sort of gentle patience, as though she knew what he was going to say, and wondered how long he was going to take to get it out. Suddenly she smiled.

“You mean,” she said, “that you went to tea with Roberta because you—*wanted to?*”

He stared at her. “How do you know?” he asked.

She said, “Oh, it's quite simple! Besides . . . I *can* understand that you should want to have tea with Roberta. And that when she'd changed her frock you wanted it even more . . . that you should have suggested taking her for a run.”

Dick continued to stare at her.

“It's quite right,” he said, “it did happen just like that—only it's wrong, somehow, that you should know it . . . that you should understand. I thought women never understood things of that sort. Never knew, I mean, that a man could be attracted, even for a minute, by a girl he didn't care a snap of the fingers for.”

She smiled, and the tender familiarity of it hurt him.

“I couldn't bear,” she said, “to be like that . . . to be *afraid*. So that I kept you to myself . . . made you pretend that you never looked at any other girl . . . never saw that there are hundreds of quite charming girls who are much nicer to look at than I am. They say that if you're in love you're jealous . . . that you can't help it. The girls and I at King's are always arguing that point. They think, most of them, that jealousy's natural. I think it's mean . . . loathsome. If you're really in love you can't really be jealous, because that means you doubt. . . . Isn't that how it seems to you?”

Dick's face wore a look of perplexity.

“I don't know. . . . I believe I could be furiously jealous. I used sometimes to hate young Jack Heston with his adoring eyes following you about.”

A fat man with an umbrella was crossing behind Dick's back. When he had gone Caryl said softly:

"You needn't be jealous of Jack. He knows there'll never be anybody in the world for me but you. That's why it was so awful yesterday when I thought you were deceiving me. . . . I couldn't bear that, Dick. . . . Whatever happens, I must *know*. I can bear anything but not knowing."

"Nothing's going to happen. . . . I shan't pay Roberta any more visits unless you come too."

"Oh! but why not—if you want to? I couldn't bear her to think I'd forbidden you. . . . I wish she hadn't seen yesterday that I minded . . . such an awful exhibition."

Dick smiled.

"Don't you want to know what we did when you'd gone?"

"No—it doesn't matter."

But she was torn suddenly with the hope that he would tell her: wanted to hug him when he did.

"I went off home," he said. "I saw you tearing off down the road and deliberately went in the opposite direction."

"You were angry with me?"

"No, with myself. . . . But not angry enough to punish you by staying with Roberta. . . ."

She smiled at that.

"Oh, Dick!" she said.

And Dick said: "Darling—come over here."

She moved towards him.

"Meet me half-way."

He obeyed. He put his hands on her arms as he had done yesterday, and, as it had done yesterday, his touch burned through and scorched her. Suddenly she was at the mercy of the tempestuous emotion it roused in her.

"Oh, Dick," she said, "I'd give all the world to be even *half* as beautiful as Roberta!"

Then, quite suddenly, she burst into tears. When he took her in his arms she hid her face against his sleeve as she had done yesterday. He drew her up closely against him.

"I don't want you altered," he said; "you *are* beautiful—beautiful all through. . . . There isn't anybody but you, Caryl. There never will be. . . . It's you I want all the time."

She sat up and dried her eyes. The fat man with the umbrella was coming back again.

"He thinks we've been quarrelling," she said, hastily putting her handkerchief out of sight.

"And we haven't been, have we, darling?"

She smiled at him, gathering up her cherries.

"No," she said, "we've only been trying to understand . . . to get things right. . . ."

"And are they right now?"

"Absolutely."

"You blessed dear," he said, and waited for the fat man to pass before he kissed her.

CHAPTER FIVE

1

DICK was in town the greater part of July, and those few weeks represented for Caryl a period of happiness she was scarcely to know again. It was mixed up with much talk of Russia and Poland, with jaunts to the swimming baths and frantic journeyings in the sidecar to and fro on the face of the earth. It came to her out of the blue . . . a golden thing of love and laughter, in which she not only neglected her work, but forgot all about it. John Suffield, pleased with Dick's prowess in the provinces, was disposed to look with kindly eyes upon his period of partial slacking in those July weeks. At the end of them Caryl was going away with her mother, and Dick's nose should be kept more rigidly to the grindstone. He wasn't going to encourage any idea of slackness in Caryl's husband. Caryl, like Allan, thought money didn't matter—an extraordinary conviction for his children to hold, though he expected, so far as Caryl was concerned, to use her pride in Dick to prove his own contrary conviction. Dick would know that Caryl didn't care for people to fail. True, she didn't associate success with money, but she thought it was "up" to you to do what you set out to do. Thus Caryl's father upon Caryl and the man Caryl loved. "A charming chap, that fiancé of young Caryl's," he'd say to people and invite them home to dinner to meet him.

Throughout the doubtful July of nineteen-twenty Caryl's leisure and Dick's seemed to be equally divided between the "scouring England" campaign and the open-air swimming bath at Chiswick. Occasionally they took Roberta with them, but Roberta did not swim and did not really care for riding on the carrier of a motor-cycle. Moreover, she did not take kindly to the goggles in which Caryl cheerfully disguised herself, and a slight spill in which she grazed her ankle was used as an excuse for discontinuing a bad practice. Thereafter their

jaunts *à trois* were made minus the sidecar, much to Anne Suffield's relief. "It really isn't safe, Caryl," she'd said so often; "and dear, I wish you'd ask Dick to drive a little more slowly. It does look so dreadfully dangerous."

They only laughed at her. The risk was the pleasure of it, they told her. But John Suffield backed his wife. "What the pleasure is, going at that rate, I *can't* see," he said. "You motor-cycle people are the most selfish people on the road. You'll have your licence suspended some day, my boy, and serve you right!"

"You haven't seen Dick smile at policemen," Caryl ventured.

"I've seen him smile at *you*," said her father.

"Not at all the same thing!" declared Caryl.

The happiness that came to her now was sunny and golden. Little things went to its make-up, unconsidered trifles, simple youthful adventures that spoil in the telling and yet made, together, a wealth of experience that sat blooming in Caryl's heart like a rose.

But Pen carped.

"I can't think why you cart Roberta about with you so much," she said once to Caryl. "Even for you moderns I should have thought two was company. . . ."

"But we don't . . . often," Caryl said, who felt an inward twinge that "often" was not often enough. She was worried by the thought of Roberta, who plainly these days was not happy. To be as pretty as all that and to get so little out of life! Caryl was quite certain she and Allan were not happy together. Probably it wasn't either's fault: just that they had no interests in common. Guen, she knew, had always maintained that. But Roberta was so loyal: she never "discussed" Allan. It was always just casually you heard that he spent all his evenings over his books and papers, that he sat up far into the night; that Roberta, in town with a friend, had seen Allan with Miss Hervey at Oxford Circus Station. . . . She never complained. Things just came out, as things will, of course. But Caryl, calling Roberta friend as well as sister, and absurdly sorry for her, could not leave her entirely out of her own happiness. On those occasions when Roberta came to Adelaide Lodge to tea or dinner, and Caryl and Dick went off together somewhere afterwards, Caryl would be worried by the sight of the wistful look in Roberta's eyes, the soft envy of her

"Good-bye . . . lucky people!" The least she could do upon occasion was to ask Roberta to share her own happiness, which was so tremendous she felt she had scarcely any right to it.

Yet Pen continued to carp, sniffing with irritating regularity at what she called an "idiotic business." Caryl, she indicated, was beyond her. All this nonsense talk of "possession," this pooh-poohing of natural jealousy! Possessive? Of course love was possessive. One man, one woman—ridiculous to pretend otherwise. Besides, it only led to trouble. Certainly *she* wouldn't have been so calm about it if Tom showed as much interest in a pretty girl as Dick showed in Roberta. And yet there wasn't anything to go upon: nothing you could label or lay hold of. Seen together, Dick and Roberta seemed to have extraordinarily little to say to each other; moreover, what Dick said often had an edge to it. He was frequently rude: not just carelessly rude, but deliberately so, as if he disliked Roberta and really wanted to hurt her. You'd have sworn Roberta didn't mind, she took it with such astonishing good humour and with a quiet, inscrutable smile; a smile that seemed to hide things, that was almost articulate—the smile of a woman who has some secret inner knowledge and knows that the man has it too, that he is struggling not to recognise it. And when Caryl, catching what Dick had said, would rush in with some lightly worded reproach, Roberta would stop smiling. Her face would take on a slightly pained expression, as though she said to herself, "Surely they can't be going to quarrel about me!"

So silly of Roberta, Pen would think—and so conceited. No nice woman ("married, too!") would imagine that an engaged couple could quarrel about her. And yet those evenings when Roberta and Allan came to dinner and afterwards there was dancing, how *could* Caryl endure it? For Roberta danced far too frequently with Dick. She gave him every waltz. You couldn't help noticing it.

And Caryl *could* endure it. "Oh, I hate waltzing!" she said airily. "I can't see why anybody bothers about it to-day!"

But Roberta said she "adored" it (even Pen could read that in her ecstatic face), and Dick was "such a ripping partner." "So are you, silly!" Caryl would say. She thought Roberta danced divinely. Pen, of course, merely thought she danced a good deal too frequently with Dick.

However, at the end of July Caryl went away with her mother and father to the Cornish coast. Pen remained behind to keep house for a husband unable to get away so early. Dick, on and off, was to be still in town, and though Cornwall was a long way off and railway fares were the devil, he promised himself at least a few days of Caryl's fortnight if they could be worked in.

The Wokingham cottage was neglected. Save for a couple of week-ends nobody had used it. The summer was too bad. Nobody could stand the country in wet weather, except Caryl and Dick, who swore they liked it. And with nobody to chaperon them the Cottage was useless even to them. (Presumably even they saw that!) John Suffield swore at it mildly as a needless expense and wished the Hestons would take it off his hands again. But the Hestons wouldn't. The Hestons were enjoying life at Herne Bay—at least, Marjorie was, amid the delights of a new flirtation, with a young Army captain well in tow. Meantime there were threats of war and strikes: Labour victories and Labour conferences, and peace rocking perilously again on the knife-edge of diplomacy. . . .

Guen had gone back to Green Hedges at the beginning of July, and Allan had lost in the first round of his fight with Madeleine for the retention of the new lease of their friendship. There was to be nothing now but those occasional meetings when they might both choose the same Thursday evening to come and talk to Guen.

"But has it struck you that it isn't Guen we talk to?" Allan asked.

It had, Madeleine said. Her dark eyes surveyed him calmly. No suggestion of agitation in their brown depths. "It's so difficult," she said, "to throw off a bad habit!"

It was the nearest she had come to any definite reference to the days of their old friendship, and even now she backed away from it instantly, ratifying her refusal by a gentle "good-bye." Impossible to open up the topic afresh. Allan was beaten: he knew it.

There would be the second round. . . .

It came, most unexpectedly, just a week later when Allan dropped in to a concert at the Queen's Hall and, promenading in the interval, came face to face with Madeleine. It was a mixed evening of Bach and Rimsky-Korsakov and MacDowell, and finding a couple of seats belonging to temerarious people who had ventured upon stretching their legs, Allan and Madeleine sat down and grumbled that the Rimsky-Korsakov had not included *Scheherazade*.

"After all," Madeleine said presently, "we're ungrateful to complain, because they might have given us Saint Saëns," and out of the crowded past a memory came drifting to Allan. "Of course," he said, "you don't like Saint Saëns." And he remembered her exact phrase: "He makes quite delightful noises. . . ."

It struck him that he wasn't doing much with this second round. It struck him, further, that Madeleine did not mean him to do much with it. He heard her say that she wished Sir Henry Wood would cut out the vocal items, because mere technical skill afflicted her, it seems, as Saint Saëns afflicted them both—it meant nothing. And nobody's singing this evening had meant much except that of the woman who'd sung the thing from *Butterfly*. Old-fashioned and quite wrong, perhaps, to admire the tuneful Puccini, but they couldn't help it. Extraordinarily moving that Finale in the first Act of *Butterfly*. . . . Opera didn't affect Madeleine like that as a rule. It was so difficult to get worked up about the sorrows people recounted in song. A queer artificial convention this of opera, this singing of the things which happened to you. And yet, Allan hazarded, not so queer, after all. The earliest poems and stories were always sung, and the first sagas. Widsith singing at the Court of Eormanric: the poet of *Beowulf* and *The Fight at Finnsburg*. "It's we who've grown artificial," he said, "who no longer sing of our adventures."

"Isn't it because we have so few?" Madeleine asked. "Life's become essentially undramatic—grey, not black, don't you think? Wordsworth knew that. Urban life is not adventurous: it's full not of physical, but of mental fights. It's impulse, not action, our life to-day."

He looked at her; saw that her eyes were steady, empty of

concern, that her face showed nothing of embarrassment. Her hands, clasped loosely in her lap, her programme beneath them, were quite still. They, no more than her face, showed hint of trouble—gave anything away. It came to Allan in that moment that she was happy—really happy, in the way Wordsworth must have been in a wood, and to-night he was in the mood to envy her: to envy her the happiness she had wrested from life's unwilling hands.

That second round! Nothing to hope for from that. Allan abandoned it. "What have you been doing with yourself lately?" he asked.

Crowds of things, it seemed. She was very busy over Mr. Osenton's new book—a startling Shakespearean theory for which the critics would slay him. Quite soon, when the book was through the Press, they were going off to Devon. . . . At odd moments she had found time to go to some Exhibition and to some Food Reform Lecture. (The queer things they sent people tickets for!) The exhibitions, in their way, had been hilarious: the Food Lecture depressing. It had told her nothing except that all her life she'd been eating all the wrong things at all the wrong times.

The audience began to straggle back. The promenade slowed down and was still. Several people said "Sh-h-h" too loudly and too late, so that the opening notes of *Poème Erotique* were lost. So, too, was the opportunity to reopen that question of another meeting. And, somehow, walking down Regent Street to the tube none other presented itself. Nothing could have been more casual than their farewell and nothing more remarkable than that Roberta should have been there to see it.

She came in within ten minutes of his arrival.

"I just missed your train," she said.

"My train?"

"The one you caught at Oxford Circus. I was behind you in the queue at the booking office. . . I've never seen anyone look so nice in that particular shade of blue as Miss Hervey does."

"You saw us? We ran into each other at the Queen's Hall."

Roberta, standing there drawing off her gloves, smiled understandingly.

"Oh, don't think I *mind*," she said. "I shouldn't care if it hadn't been . . . accidental."

Allan frowned.

"And who've *you* been gadding with?"

"Gadding? Why do you put it like that? I've been to the show at the Palladium."

"I didn't say where. I said with whom."

"With Tommy."

"Oh! . . . so that's started again, has it?"

"Only just."

"Supposing I object?"

"Oh, don't be silly! Why should you? Tommy's all right. . . . Besides, if I don't object to your friends, I really can't see why you should object to mine."

"A sort of blackmail arrangement, eh?"

"Really," said Roberta, "you're very disagreeable. I should have thought it's much the best for us to go our own ways."

She took off her wrap, hung it over her arm and turned to leave the room.

"Good night," she said.

"Good night," he answered.

When she had gone he stood there with clenched hands, as he had done so many times before, wrestling with the desire that assailed him to rush after her, take her by the shoulders and assert himself. But the desire tended to grow fainter. He still minded that she flung him her careless "Good night" over an indifferent shoulder. He despised her, but he minded. All his being stretched forward to that day when he would not mind at all, when he would not suffer. Yet to-night he was subtly aware of some change in her attitude, saw that her cold indifference had been touched to the faintest show of interest in him and his evening. For a moment he wondered why, and then suddenly he understood. Roberta was interested in this renewal of his friendship with Madeleine because she might be able to make use of it. She wanted her freedom, and she saw this friendship of his with Madeleine as the key which might unlock the door. . . . True to her rôle of injured innocence, she would put him, not herself, in the wrong.

In that one second of understanding his mind was made up. He was not going to run any risks of that kind. Madeleine and he must not meet again. . . .

He was appalled by the certainty of that piece of knowledge; but he held to his decision, even when Thursday came and

Roberta, bedecked for Tommy's foregathering, supposed he wasn't "going her way." He wasn't, he said, going anybody's way. He wasn't, that evening, going out. . . . Roberta shrugged her shoulders and went off alone. Ten minutes later she returned, letting herself in with her latchkey and putting her head in at the door to explain that there was something she had forgotten. Also, her face declared, there was something she had not expected. Clearly she had not believed she would see Allan sitting there quietly over his book, had expected to find him upstairs changing his collar or already, perhaps, out of the house altogether. Quite obviously she hadn't believed him when he said, "I'm not going out to-night."

Allan wanted to laugh—had much ado to keep the corners of his mouth from twisting upwards while Roberta stood in the doorway looking in upon him. But he was very sure that Roberta didn't laugh. She'd be too chagrined for that. Besides, Roberta saw the thing that was funny, never the thing that was humorous.

When the door closed upon her for the second time he bent himself to absorption in his book. Ten o'clock came, and presently a knock at the door. Allan opened it and Guen came in with reproaches that he had not turned up that evening at the Attic. "I specially wanted to see you," she said.

"Anything up?" he inquired. What could possibly have necessitated a special visit at this hour of the night? So unlike Guen, this sort of thing. He followed her into the little dining-room and shut the door.

"Nothing's up," she said, "only I had to come and tell you. . . . We were wrong about that affair of Jan's being our secret. It isn't. Not only that—it never was."

"You mean—mother knew?"

"All the time."

There was a little silence, out of which Allan spoke presently with the air of one continuing a conversation begun dim centuries ago.

"How do you suppose she found out?" he asked.

"That woman at St. Julian's. . . . She didn't hold her tongue. . . . I don't know why we ever supposed she would. And then that afternoon I went to see Mrs. Hill there was another letter. I don't know why mother opened it . . . but she did."

"So she knew . . . when you got back?"

Guen nodded. "And the next day she went to Parson's Green herself. There's been a baby."

"Jan's? Mother knew that, too?"

"There isn't anything she doesn't know. While we were kidding ourselves she didn't even suspect, she's been doing things. You see, the husband found out . . . came across some luggage label or other. He wasn't generous . . . demanded his pound of flesh. Mother seems to have arranged things. Her own people do something for her, and I gather that mother and father do the rest."

"The old man, too! How did he take it?"

"Quite sensibly. . . . You see, there wasn't any scandal."

"That must have helped a lot."

"It did." Guen performed her funny little trick of raised eyebrows and shoulders.

"And what about Pen and Caryl? Do they know?"

"Not Caryl. Mother's idea, that. She has a host of good reasons why Caryl shouldn't know yet. Pen, I understand, is doing the romantic stunt about it. Besides, Pen never believes more than she wants to believe about anything."

That, Guen knew, was Pen's way of protecting herself. She had made of it an effective shield. So many people had that amiable trick it was strange that Guen, with all her cleverness, could not achieve it. Though she drew the curtain she always knew what was happening on the other side of it.

"Come and see me on Thursday week," she said. "I've so much to say, and there's no time now. I promised to meet Tony for the eleven-twenty-five at Charing Cross. . . . If it's Madeleine you're trying to dodge you needn't worry. She goes out of town to-morrow for a week or two."

A strange empty feeling assailed Allan. "I'll come along with you," he said, and together they went off down the high-road and on to the tube that went to Charing Cross. It was striking twelve when Allan let himself into the house. Roberta met him in the hall, with a smile of satisfaction on her lips.

"So you went out, after all," she said.

"I've been up to Charing Cross with Guen," he explained. "I didn't go up to the Attic. She wanted my advice and came along here to see me."

"I see," said Roberta. But she continued to smile.

CHAPTER SIX

1

ALLAN turned up on the Thursday week, and before anybody else arrived he and Guen sat and talked it out. . . .

"I want to bury my diminished head," she said, "because I minded that visit to Parson's Green so much and because mother didn't mind—in that way—at all. Because the . . . nastiness . . . of it didn't paralyse her as it paralysed me."

"Us!" said Allan.

"Oh, if you like. But it doesn't make it any better. Besides, it was I who insisted that it would kill mother to know. I really thought it would. It's our colossal arrogance that crushes me . . . the impudent futile assumptions of youth. I thought there were things in life mother simply couldn't bear—and it was I who couldn't bear them, who'd have given all I possessed to have escaped that visit to Parson's Green. And I went and said all the wrong things. . . . Mother went and said all the right ones. . . . She *did* something. She went out alone and filled in the gaps. I didn't even seem to know there were any. I went to get rid of evidence, mother to collect it. And she was right and I was wrong. How do you account for it, Allan?"

Allan didn't, but he said vaguely that it wasn't, perhaps, a problem for youth to have tackled.

"But surely this *was* our subject. We pride ourselves on our broad outlook, our common-sense view of sex. We can't get out of it that way. It's borne in upon me, Allan, that mother and her generation have something that ours hasn't. I don't mean that any one of our generation would have failed as badly as we—as I—did. We overdid our belief in our hardness. Not expecting to be hurt at all we were laid out completely at the first twinge. Let's hope that's peculiar to

ourselves . . . that Madeleine, for example, would have escaped *that*."

"She would," said Allan out of his deep conviction that Madeleine knew how to deal with her own wounds.

"I think so, too," said Guen. "Madeleine's like mother. She knows that it isn't the growing of a pachyderm (our favourite remedy) that protects us, but only that deep quiet of the spirit that she—and mother—has and we have not. That's why they can look at facts without being utterly crushed, without wanting to be sick. Mother believes, deep down, in the ultimate goodness of life—in its worth-whileness—as Caryl does, and we don't, Allan. She can take the long view and we can't."

"You mean our rebellions and our angers render us myopic?"

"Yes . . . we see nothing save that everything is wrong and that we can't put it right. Mother sees that, too, and is content to make it ever so little less wrong. She believes that it is worth doing, and we don't. We believe in nothing, Allan, save our own futility."

"And that," said Allan, "has us eternally gagged and bound."

"That explains, doesn't it," said Guen, "why all our lives we've hesitated on the threshold of things—of our unpopular societies, for instance. We'd go to their meetings because they said the sort of things we think right. We gave to their funds for the same reason, though we never really identified ourselves with them. We're essentially the sort of people, Allan, who never 'join' things, not out of fear of their unpopularity, but of their futility—and ours. There isn't any plan of action we believe in deeply enough . . . and as mongers of words we get tired of them and hunger for deeds. We're destructive, not constructive. We only see that what gets in the way of the juggernaut gets crushed. For us nothing rises from the ashes of sacrifice. We do *not* believe John Brown's spirit goes marching on. Either there is no spirit to march or it, too, lies mouldering in John Brown's grave. Isn't that how *you* feel?"

Allan nodded. "And yet," he said, "I do know that if there is anything more blasphemous than a too-easy optimism it's a too-easy pessimism. Our generation's in the dock to one or other of the charges. Half of us are guilty of the one: and half of the other."

"And between the two," said Guen, "we cancel each other out."

She got up and made tea, kneeling to do it before a gas ring that stood beside a wide hearth, so that her brown-clad back was towards Allan.

"Allan, I'm so sick of myself," she said, "I simply can't stand things . . . and Tony's as bad. We're no good, we scribblers. This morning I asked him to go over to see some out-of-work the *News* has been featuring. . . . You know the sort of thing . . . complete with photograph of self and wife, with progeny. . . . Oh, they gave his address, of course—nothing's left to the out-of-works, not even their privacy. Well . . . Tony wouldn't. He said he'd send on my cheque and add to it: but there was an Unemployment Committee who had their 'investigators.' "

"A.G.'s very busy," said Allan uneasily.

"Oh yes . . . I know. But that wasn't the reason. . . ." She swung round from tea-pot and kettle. "Allan, he didn't *want* to go. . . . He couldn't *bear* to go—any more than I could. Tony's like us, Allan . . . and I hadn't thought it of him. He, too, can't bear to look at life . . . can't bear to think about it. He, too, sits in a quiet corner and writes about it. . . ."

Again Allan made that uneasy movement in his chair.

"Did you give him your cheque?" he asked.

"No . . . I sent it along to the Committee, through the post. . . . Oh, I know it wouldn't have done any good if I *had* gone, but I despise myself because I couldn't. I remember how I despised Mrs. Hill . . . not because she'd had that affair with Jan, but because she lacked courage and honesty. As though that isn't what's the matter with the lot of us!"

"But at least we *know* it."

"Not always. . . . At least we won't admit it. This morning I made excuses for asking Tony to go down to Islington for me. . . . I was too busy. . . . It was only when he pleaded the same excuse and got irritable that I admitted the truth. . . . It wasn't 'busyness' at all—with him or with me!—but funk—sheer funk. Do you remember that girl in Galsworthy's *Fraternity*?"

Allan didn't, particularly.

"Oh, surely," said Guen. "Thyme, wasn't her silly name? She tried slumming and went with her young man into a wood

and wept because she couldn't stand it. And her young man, mighty scornful, took her home again and was beautifully rude to her father and mother. . . . My God, it's never occurred to me before, Allan, but I'm *like* that girl. I simply can't 'stand' things. . . ."

"But you don't weep and no young man has taken you home and been rude to your parents, beautifully or otherwise."

"I'm exactly like Thyme, all the same. And I think I hate myself as much as I hope she did. God knows. . . . Only, somehow, my failure's worse than Thyme's. It isn't only that I lack courage and purpose, but that I supposed other people lacked them too. At least Thyme never made that mistake about her young man. Mine, in this particular instance, wasn't only failure, but impudent failure as well."

She got up and with a twisted smile began to pour out tea.

"There really isn't anything you can say for me . . . for 'us' if you like."

There was a long silence in which Guen poured out more tea and sat staring out through the long open window over the London roofs. It was after six o'clock and the day seemed to be standing still, poised for one tiny interval upon the edge of evening. There was a glow already in the sky, stretching down from the west to the east, like a slowly-spoken blessing. There were times when the peace of Nature came cruelly mocking the disruption of the universe man had created. One hated Nature for her very indifference—because she didn't care. And envied her, too, because she could be like that and remain beautiful, desirable. . . .

2

Later they talked of Roberta. . . .

Still later, when they had shaken hands in their undemonstrative fashion and Allan had gone, Guen went out on to the balcony. The colour in the sky had spread into a rich deep harmony towards which the London roofs reached up like hungry suppliants. The buzz of itinerant humanity floated up to her. People were going home from their labours: out to their suburbs . . . to wives and children. It was as though they were filing out from a beleaguered city, escaping. . . .

She would not "escape" for three hours yet. . . . Three

hours yet, for her of "shop"—of book-talk that wasn't life and wasn't like life. . . . That, perhaps, was just as well: life had a trick of being overwhelming. It had been that this afternoon. She had the sensation, now, of drawing back her skirts, of letting the stream flow on without her. She was tired.

The door opened and A.G. came in.

"Allan gone?" he asked.

Guen came in from the verandah and stood watching him as he tipped out the fruit he had brought in with him into a large blue bowl that had a big chip out of its edge.

"Tony," she said, "it's nice to be married to you."

A.G. looked up, pipe in mouth.

"I gathered you felt that way about it," he said. "I return the compliment. Why this sudden declaration, O Thou Undemonstrative One?"

"Because it's so wonderful that I *should* be . . . so wonderful we should have found each other. . . . You see, we're the only people in the world who know the truth about sex."

"You seem," said Tony, "to have been having a delightful conversation with that brother of yours. The world's getting better, Guen. . . . You have got to believe that. . . . Even over this sex business."

Guen came over to her husband and put her arm through his.

"Don't believe it," she said. "When I was seventeen a man in London Wall stopped me and asked me to lunch with him. A man in Holborn this afternoon suggested tea."

"I feel sure you dealt with the situation quite ably," Tony said. "Have an apple?"

Guen shook her head, relinquished Tony's arm and moved over to the window, beyond which the sky hung now like a blue-grey awning.

"You tired?" A.G. enquired.

"Rather," she said, "but it isn't that. . . ."

"What then?"

"I only want to escape . . . to get away from things."

He smiled, recognising her mood. He knew that, for the moment, the world had sunk to the level of the bus and tube announcements: "Please do not spit." "Mind your pockets." Humanity, reduced to the lowest common denominator. . . .

"I'm not very brave, Tony. . . . I can't escape from myself I know: but I do want to get away from things. I want to hide."

"Behind Green Hedges?"

She nodded.

Wasn't it what they all wanted—all those people down below hurrying away from London as from a doomed city, all pouring out in everlasting procession towards their own particular place of forgetfulness? Green Hedges! Behind which you might shut yourself up from things. . . . Where you might draw the curtains and shoot home the bolt. Where you might stop thinking and catch at serenity and strength. . . .

Green Hedges and Tony. Life gave you that and life was good because of it. She was silent, turning the good thought over.

"By the way," said Tony suddenly, "I found time after all to-day to run over and see that out-of-work chap at Islington. . . ."

Guen swung round, hot colour in her cheeks.

"You *went*? Oh, Tony, and I thought *you* faked it, too. . . ."

"You were right. I did."

"What happened?"

"When I got there? Nothing sensational. I only saw the wife. . . . The man's found temporary work. I left my address and told her to get into communication with me when it gave out. It was all I could do. . . . They'll get the benefit of your cheque, if you've sent it on to the Committee."

"Another patch! Oh, Tony, I wish we were Christian Scientists. It must be so comforting to know that poverty is only a delusion of the mind and that hunger can be cured by thought!"

She turned away again and stood staring out across the London roofs, and A.G. stealing a glance at her went on polishing his apples. He knew that look on her face, had grown used to seeing it during those difficult days of the war when, beneath that quiet exterior, she was breaking her heart over things. You couldn't help her. She suffered as do all imaginative people who have moods of passionate distaste for things as they are. But with Guen, as Tony knew, it was more, too, than that. He was aware that she was despising

herself because she knew that though she suffered now, to-morrow she would be writing all the better because of it.

He went over and slipped an arm round her.

"Seeing life as the one irrevocable disaster. No damn good in anything, eh?"

She pressed herself against the pillar of his arm and let the bitter tide of her self-contempt drift out upon the calm sanity of their common affection.

"There's you and Green Hedges," she said, "for anchorage."

CHAPTER SEVEN

1

THE story of Jan's illicit love-affair hardened in Pen a determination not to have "any more nonsense of that sort" in the family, and a determination to give Caryl a "good talking to" when the occasion offered.

It offered very nicely, as it happened, on the Monday following the return from Cornwall on the Saturday. Anne Suffield was out and at four o'clock Caryl put her books away and came down to the drawing-room for tea. She had not seen Dick since her return, and she seemed amused when Pen, pouring out tea in her careful fashion, asked in a manner heavily casual if she had heard much from him whilst she had been in Cornwall.

"Letters you mean?" Caryl asked staring unconcernedly over the rim of her cup. "No, he didn't write much. Neither did I. We don't, you know. We haven't any flair for words. It was for us Providence invented the picture post card."

"And he didn't come down, after all."

"That was father's fault. He kept him busy."

"Not only father," said Pen.

Caryl poured herself out another cup of tea and stared at her sister.

"Oh, come off it, Pen," she said, "and spit it out."

Pen "spat it out." She said, "Are you aware that Dick is in the habit of dropping in to Berta's for tea?"

"Not in the habit," said Caryl. Her face was untroubled. "He goes to Berta's sometimes, if that's what you mean."

"It isn't," said Pen, and proceeded to explain that one afternoon when she had been at Number Sixteen Dick had appeared with his sidecar at the garden gate, very much as though he were used to arriving in that casual fashion: that, seeing Pen, he had made some excuse for his visit and for not staying: that several days later Pen, again in Roberta's

neighbourhood to see a woman who proved to be not at home, was seized with a bad head and had called in at Roberta's for a rest before walking back. It wasn't true to say she had gone there to "spy": she really hadn't been well. And Dick was in Roberta's drawing-room, his cycle at the kitchen door. . . .

The faintest of shadows passed over Caryl's face, indicative of the reminiscential cloud which crossed her mind.

"Well?" she said. "Why not? There's no secret about it: Dick's certain to tell me all about it when I see him this evening."

"Of course, since he was discovered."

"Don't use stupid words. There *was* no discovery."

"You mean you . . . allow this?"

"Of course I allow it. Why *shouldn't* Dick have tea occasionally with Roberta? You're too desparately old-fashioned for words."

"If you are bent upon being a fool. . . ."

"I'm bent on being the exact opposite, if possible. It's no good, old girl. I hate your world of possessive affection. Always shall. I believe in the liberty of the individual."

"It sounds all right . . . but it never *does*. . . ."

Caryl smiled.

"That's just where women like you make a mistake. . . . They won't understand that a man may be in love with one woman and yet be aware that there are others in the world worth talking to . . . other women that he likes!"

"A man who's engaged or married hasn't any right to notice other women—much less like them enough to go and have tea with them."

Again Caryl laughed.

"Oh," she said, "go away, go away. You're impossible!"

So Pen went away, and, as Caryl had supposed, that evening when Dick came in he told her all about things at once—mentioned those two visits of his to Meldon Avenue in his charmingly casual fashion as though they didn't matter, as of course they didn't. He'd been at a loose end and had fallen back on Roberta. "We had tea, and that second day a run round," he said. "I'm afraid Mrs. Warren disapproved of us and that she'd be awfully glad to know it rained and spoil Robert's new hat."

Caryl exulted. The liberty of the individual! Of course you believed in it! Pen was altogether too old-fashioned. Really, you couldn't be bothered. . . . You couldn't—even if you wanted to!—chain a man up quite like that. Besides, they never *stayed* chained: they only pretended and then you had lies and deceit and make-believe, than which there couldn't, possibly, be anything worse. . . .

But the next time Pen saw Roberta with Dick they didn't see her. He was taking Roberta in the sidecar up towards the Heath and they were going much too fast to see anybody. . . . The evening before there had been dancing at Adelaide Lodge and Roberta and Dick had danced as usual, in Pen's opinion, too much together. And Dick the next day was going to Liverpool for a couple of days by some train in the afternoon. Caryl did not ask for particulars because she never went to see him off, considering that a silly habit in a girl engaged to a man who was constantly going away. Going and coming, breaking in upon you unexpectedly, disturbing your work. Caryl liked it much better that way.

On this particular occasion, however, Dick must have altered his mind about the train, because Pen was quite positive that it was Dick she saw, soon after three, riding furiously like that up towards the Heath. Vaguely Caryl was a little hurt. He might, since he was free, have given her this afternoon, even though she had impressed upon him that she was going to "swot." Such a fine afternoon, too. It was horribly difficult not to mind just a little. . . .

But to Pen she showed a different front.

"Well . . . I told him I was too busy to see him off . . . though for once he did ask me . . . and, anyway, I shall hear all about it when he comes back," she said.

But she didn't. Dick came back on Wednesday and said nothing. Evidently he had forgotten. Caryl, gently provocative, jogged his memory.

"Have you seen Roberta lately?" she enquired, mischief in voice and look.

Dick turned quickly and stared at her.

"Oh, I don't know . . . not for weeks, surely," he said.

That was how much he remembered his outings with Roberta. Oh, but he couldn't have forgotten something that happened only three days ago. . . .

"Darling . . . it doesn't matter. . . . Please don't think I mind or felt hurt . . . but didn't you see her on Saturday afternoon—the day you went up to Liverpool?"

"I did not!" said Dick. He had the surprised look of the man who has been tripped up, caught out, but Caryl didn't see.

"Then Pen must have been mistaken," she said easily. She wasn't disturbed. She was quite certain that that was how it had happened . . . that Pen had made a mistake.

She said so later to Pen herself, who stared at her.

"Rubbish, my dear child," she said. "Why, Roberta herself has admitted it!"

And again Caryl's world rocked.

She grew afraid. She was like a man living in a haunted house—afraid to go upstairs for fear of what he might see. She moved about in a twilight of apprehension, holding aloft her candle of common-sense and self-control. This thing would pass if only you pretended it wasn't there . . . you daren't believe anything else. And she pretended, all the time and all the time, that there was nothing there. . . .

2

She did not refer again to the incident. Somehow Dick's lie had shut it down into a pit it made you giddy to look down. . . . It ought, that lie ("I did not!"—so emphatic, not just plain "No"), to have killed her love for Dick, but it hadn't. Deep down she knew it was not the lie that hurt half so much as this heart-breaking knowledge that Dick had chosen to spend an afternoon with Roberta when he might have spent it with Caryl herself. *He had preferred Roberta.* It wasn't that he had gone half so much as that he wanted, had elected, to go. That, surely, was what Pen missed when she counselled an "ultimatum." She did not see that if Dick *wanted* to go to Roberta there must be something drawing him all the time. . . .

But Caryl saw it. There were times when she never saw anything else. She was desperately aware that Dick was constantly in Roberta's company, but she said nothing. Outwardly her relationship with Dick had not altered: nobody guessed;

but beneath that quiet air of the usual there turned and twisted and agonised some dreadful thing that caught her at times by the throat, stifling her. She went still to the little house in Meldon Avenue, but with a difference. Even in her silent withdrawal, her hurt pride and love, there was something which sent her constantly to Roberta. And from Roberta she learnt nothing. She seldom mentioned Dick, and if she did it was in such a casual way that it told you nothing or told you, perhaps, too much. Her talk was all of Tommy Carew and the people she was meeting at her flat. Impossible to credit her with a secret passion for Dick. It must be Dick himself who was just "making a fool of himself." Looking at Roberta, you couldn't believe she was "encouraging" him, yet, for all that, it came to Caryl one day that she was going to Meldon Avenue so frequently because she simply couldn't bear to let Roberta out of her sight. . . . In a passion of disgust she stopped going there altogether.

But she could not stop Roberta's occasional appearances at Adelaide Lodge to tea: nor Roberta's reproaches that she never came now to Meldon Avenue. And when she stayed to dinner and Dick turned up it was unbearable, because you couldn't possibly watch Dick sitting there in the same room with Roberta without seeing how things were. Dick, with his moods of silence, his blatant rudeness to Roberta, and Roberta's quiet, inscrutable smiling. . . . He was like a man struggling in the grip of something which he loathed but which he could not shake off. And once after dinner she came upon them in the garden, saw Dick turn suddenly, take her in his arms and kiss her in a way that turned Caryl sick. She sat there in the garden long after Dick and Roberta had gone in: dull misery in her heart, her face white and drawn beneath the evening sky. When Dick came presently to look for her she did not make a scene. Some little bit of her had frozen: all the rest palpitated with disgust and misery and a frantic effort to understand. It was horrible, this thing that was happening to her, this crumbling of her passionate happiness to a heap of dust and ashes at her feet.

"You'll catch cold," Dick told her, sitting down at her side.

"I don't care," she said, letting her hand lie motionless in his.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said.

"Why don't you say, outright, that you saw me kissing Berta."

Her hand moved slightly in his.

"Don't," she said.

"But you did see?"

Her head bent lower.

"It wasn't the first time," he said.

"I knew that."

All about them the night came, slow-footed. A new moon, a rim of silver, was rising slowly through the London trees. Caryl raised her head and sat with wide eyes staring at misery.

"Caryl, I swear to you I don't *want* to kiss her!"

"I know that, too," she said.

She turned her face to him, and the look in her eyes robbed him of excuses. He made a gesture of despair.

"It's you I care for . . . not Roberta. It's just a damnable kind of fascination. . . . I try to keep away from her, God knows!"

There was a humble look about him, very strange and painful to behold, as if he were beseeching her to understand. . . . And she didn't. She didn't understand in the least. "If I could," she thought, "perhaps it wouldn't hurt so much." And suddenly she took his hands, bending over them in a passion of tears.

"It's something in me," she said, "something I don't give you. . . . If I gave you all you wanted, you wouldn't find things in Roberta."

"I don't find things in Roberta," he said. "Roberta gives me nothing. She has nothing to give."

He caught her up against him and began kissing her. She did not resist, but she sickened with the thought that this, half an hour ago, was how he had kissed Roberta.

She stole in presently and went up to bed. Roberta had not gone. In the little square hall she sat playing cards with Caryl's father, and as Caryl came in, said good night and went upstairs, a smile flickered for an instant across her face.

"Good night," she called softly.

"Fifteen-two," said Caryl's father, "fifteen-four . . ."

Cribbage. . . .

Dick came in through the open window. His voice floated

up and halted her there upon the staircase: "Well, sir, I think I'll say good night."

And Roberta's slow, insolent drawl, like a soft paw stroking their faces: "Aren't you going to see me home?"

Dick's voice again: "I'm sorry. . . . I'm afraid I can't manage it."

And then her father's: "It's all right, my boy, I'll see Berta home. . . . You get along." Dick went, and Caryl moved on up the staircase.

3

In the days that immediately followed nothing happened to reassure Caryl. If anything, it was the other way about. She grew afraid almost to meet Dick, afraid of what he would tell her, of what she might read in his eyes. His moods of coolness towards herself alternated with those of passion, and both frightened her, for always it was as if he was trying to make up for something, for some loss that had come to her through him, some loss of faith and trust, some thinning out of life's joy. Yet in a way she never doubted his love for her. She believed that beneath this queer attraction Roberta had for him he loved her, Caryl, not best, but only. This feeling he had for Roberta would pass. It must, since Roberta was married and did not really care. She didn't. Caryl was sure of that. She was only amusing herself, or flattered at the power Dick allowed her to see she possessed over him. It would soon pass. She had only to go on remembering that: to sit tight and say nothing. . . . Yet it was difficult to sit still at the death of her old ecstasies, of her implicit trust and belief in her lover.

She no longer trusted him. She knew that. But she believed that some day he would come back to her—whole.

CHAPTER EIGHT

1

IT was at the beginning of September that Pen, taking her courage in both hands, spoke to Allan.

A visit to the theatre where she had seen Dick with Roberta was the last straw in her secret fire of indignation.

"Did you tell Dick we saw him at the theatre?" Pen asked Caryl when she returned the next day from some appointment she had with Dick. And Caryl said, "I didn't think of it."

This conspiracy of lies! It roped everybody in!

So Pen went to Allan, who raised his eyebrows and appeared unconcerned. But he spoke to Roberta none the less.

"You seem to go out a good deal lately," he said. "I imagine you don't go alone."

"Tommy's back," said Roberta.

"I'm aware of that, but it wasn't Tommy you were at the theatre with the other evening, though you told me you were going with her when I passed on the tickets."

"She was engaged. . . . I rang up Dick at the last moment. . . ."

"Well, don't ring Dick up: or don't do it so frequently. Pen says you see too much of him."

"But Caryl knows."

"You mean you tell her when you go out together?"

"Well, not every time, perhaps. . . ."

"Now look here, Roberta. I won't have it. Don't start the old game with Dick you played with Thorp. It's just as well to remember that Dick's engaged to Caryl. I won't have you making her unhappy. It isn't as if you cared anything about Dick."

"How do you know?" asked Roberta.

"Because I know you. You've never cared for anybody in your life."

"Well, it may interest you to know that I'm very fond of Dick."

"What, precisely, do you mean by that?"

"What you mean when you say you're fond of Madeleine Hervey."

"But I don't say it."

"Well, it's true, anyway. Everybody knows. Look here, Allan, you leave me alone and I'll leave you alone."

Allan looked at her. He felt very calm, very quiet, and a sense of inward satisfaction came to him as he acknowledged these things.

"Understand me, Roberta," he said. "I won't have it! You'll keep Madeleine Hervey's name off your lips and you'll leave Dick Merrick alone."

Roberta laughed, but said nothing. Somehow, Allan was strangely disconcerted by that laugh. A tremor passed over the surface of his calm: something happened to that sense of inward satisfaction.

"You're awfully funny, you know," she said, "and melodramatic. If Dick likes to take me out sometimes, why shouldn't he? It's Caryl's fault if he does. She should make herself more attractive. She doesn't care what she wears, and she's everlastingly swotting at that old degree of hers. As if men cared for brains. . . . Good lord, I know men! Brains are the last thing they want from a woman. Besides, Caryl's always putting Dick off for something or other." . . .

"Well, don't you step into the breach, that's all," said Allan.

Roberta laughed again. Allan looked at her leaning back against the table, her hands flat upon its surface, her head thrown back, her perfect teeth revealed in the laugh that plunged a knife into the heart of Allan's calm. She was like the woman in that poem of Rossetti's who had been stabbed by her lover because she laughed . . . as Roberta was laughing now. And he was like the lover. He went over and shook her into sobriety.

"Shut up," he said. "One of these days when you laugh like that I shall kill you."

He hated her because she had made love an indelicacy . . . because she thought it was just a thing for rouged lips and the comedian's snigger. It was the only sort of love she knew. And he hated her because she dragged out his passion for her

over the clean surface of life; so that, actually, he never got away from it.

But though he had "spoken" to Roberta he was not really concerned with her friendship for Dick: he thought Pen, there, was altogether on the wrong track. Dick did not strike him as the sort of young man to lose his head over Roberta, and he was quite certain Roberta was only amusing herself as she did with every man she met. She was vain and stupid, but not vicious, and, in any case, Allan was tired of following her about. It was up to the man, the particular man of the moment, to protect himself. Never once did it occur to him that Roberta might be using Dick as she had hoped to use Madeleine Hervey. If he wouldn't, then she would . . . that she wanted her freedom as badly as all that. Tommy Carew could perhaps have told him why.

2

Certainly it was Madeleine's name on Roberta's lips rather than her friendship with Dick that drove hardest, these days, into the shell of Allan's understanding. He was utterly obsessed by the idea that what Roberta wanted was that he should put himself in the wrong: so that it never once occurred to him that she might perform that office for herself. He reasoned, too, that if Roberta saw more of Dick than was good for him, it must be Caryl's own fault. She was crazy about this idea of giving a man his freedom, and Allan supposed she knew her man. Also, Dick was one of the very few men he had never seen Roberta "make eyes" at; they did not, she and Dick, he thought, get on too well. Often, as he knew, Caryl had had to keep the peace; had frequently persuaded Roberta to go somewhere or other with Dick when she herself was too busy to go. Allan believed Caryl could fight her own battles and, anyway, was not just now particularly disposed to take her part. He was irritated by her recent frank criticism of himself in the rôle of husband. She had been, he thought, infernally and unnecessarily sorry for Roberta: had accused him of neglect and selfishness. You couldn't talk to a kid like Caryl about things, of course; but "Pen's on the wrong track," he wrote to Guen. "For God's sake, shut her up!"

What disturbed him, however, was the fact that where

Madeleine was concerned Roberta was very definitely *not* on the wrong track—a little piece of self-knowledge which partly accounted for the energy with which he had shaken Roberta when she laughed an evening or so ago. For it had shown him, that ringing laughter of hers, not only the hollowness of what he had attained, but the desirability of what he had missed. Following a will-o'-the-wisp he had missed the thing that mattered. Yet even now (and this he recognised, too) the will-o'-the-wisp ran ahead seductively. He wanted not to follow, but he could not yet turn back. Roberta was infinitely stupid. The tactics she followed were the tactics to keep him still following after her—and that was not what she wanted. She did not want to keep him, but she was not clever enough to see that the satisfaction of his passion was the easiest way of killing it. Had she satisfied him she would have lost him: the thing that held him—that defied and made naught of his reading of the rest of her—was his unsatisfied physical longing. Always—and he knew it and she did not—it was the mantle of her inaccessibility clinging about his feet that hindered his escape.

God only knew if she was satisfied with this strange shape into which she had twisted marriage. Allan only knew that he wasn't. Did she really want no more out of it, out of life, than what she had secured, immunity from claims of body and soul, liberty in which to see her own friends, go her own way? . . . They had arrived, these days, at the stage when they just did not quarrel, and Allan wished with passion sometimes that they did. He was appalled by the sense he had of their utter separateness. It was awful to live with somebody with whom you've not a single thing in common . . . who doesn't care, in any way at all, what you are or do or feel. Roberta didn't pretend any longer. She just didn't care.

Allan had been through hours of misery because he still did, and of agony because he had thought, sometimes, that it was going on for ever. But he knew now that it wasn't. He knew it because Madeleine Hervey was back in town again, and he was afraid to go to the Attic in case he should meet her.

At the beginning of September it was obvious even to Allan, who had much else to think about, that Dick was seeing a good deal less of Roberta than he had been doing during the summer. Caryl had it from Dick himself, who persisted in telling her when Roberta had "turned him down," and from Roberta herself on one of those occasions when she came to Adelaide Lodge to dinner. Finding Caryl alone in the drawing-room, she had plunged headlong into her subject.

"Caryl . . . aren't you ever coming to see me again?"

"I don't know," said Caryl uneasily. "Not just yet."

"Why not?"

"I'd rather not say."

How explain that she was still kept away by that sense of disgust which had swept over her in the summer when she realised that she had been going to Meldon Avenue to keep an eye on Roberta?

"Caryl . . . It isn't my fault—really—about Dick. I don't want him hanging around . . . not, I mean, if it's upsetting you."

Caryl put down her book and directed a level stare at Roberta.

"It isn't," she said quietly.

"Well, then, if it's all right, why don't you come to see me . . . be pally again? Look here, Caryl, twice last week I refused to go out with Dick—sent him off to you."

Caryl winced. Oh yes, Dick had come to her right enough: had come complaining that Berta had "turned him down."

"Bobbie, please . . . I really *can't* discuss this with you." She picked up her book again. The words on the page danced up and down . . . up and down . . . and when at last they stood still they had lost all their meaning. Roberta's honey-sweet voice was taking the sense out of them and out of life. . . .

"Well, I know it can't be very nice for you," she was saying. "But then, it isn't for me, either. . . . Pen glares at me enough to kill me, and Allan's been at me, too. Really, Caryl, it *isn't* my fault. . . . I *haven't* encouraged Dick."

She didn't need to, Caryl thought a little bitterly.

"I didn't suppose you had," she said. "Shall we drop the subject?"

"That's all very well . . . but I can't have you and Dick quarrelling over me."

Caryl's level brows drew together in sudden pain.

"We don't quarrel," she said. "Who told you we did?"

"Nobody. But that night when you came in from the garden . . . and Dick followed. You looked as though you'd been quarrelling then."

"We hadn't," Caryl said.

"Nor that afternoon . . . a long while ago now . . . when you went off without any tea?"

"Nor that day either," said Caryl.

"Then you haven't been . . . bothering?"

"About Dick's making himself ridiculous over you?"

"Yes . . . if you like to put it like that."

"Isn't that what it is?"

"I suppose so. All men are like that."

"Over you, you mean?"

"I tell you, Caryl, men are rotters. . . . But I'm awfully glad you don't mind about Dick . . . and me."

A funny little smile hovered for an instant over Caryl's mouth. She sat there, her fingers twisted in her lap, and she gave presently the very faintest shrug of her thin shoulders.

"Oh, *mind!*" she said just as Alice came in with the tea tray.

4.

Tea was ever a meal you could make as short or as long as you pleased. On the plea of work Caryl made it this afternoon very short indeed. But from dinner there would be no escape. And to it Dick was coming. . . . Perhaps it was accidental that Dick's visits to dinner synchronized so frequently with Roberta's. You had to think that. Besides, to-night Allan was coming, too. That ought to make it better.

But it didn't. Perhaps nobody and nothing could have made it better. Or worse. From first to last it was simply unbearable.

And yet what was it exactly? What was there about the meal which would have opened anybody's eyes without the foreknowledge that was Caryl's? "I'm looking for things," she said, "imagining things. . . ." And even that didn't help . . . nor the flood of self-disgust which swept over her.

She sat this evening, for some reason, opposite Dick instead

of beside him. The dining-table was round, and Roberta sat at what should have been the right-hand corner, so that she, too, faced Dick. And every time Caryl raised her eyes it seemed as if they went straight either towards Dick or Roberta. Yet Dick and Roberta were not talking: they addressed scarcely any remark to each other. Dick, it is true, kept up a running fire of general conversation; but to Caryl it was as though the talk was a shield between him and Roberta. His eyes were constantly upon her, and every time Caryl noticed it was like a physical pain, sharp and savage, as of a sting. When Roberta's eyes met Dick's he looked away quickly—"as if he were afraid," went Caryl's thoughts. And yet Roberta was behaving perfectly: just sitting there quite quietly eating her food, exchanging trivial remarks with Pen and Anne Suffield. Most certainly she was not coquetting with Dick—making eyes. Her air was one almost of indifference—as if she didn't care . . . (as if she needn't trouble, went Caryl's traitor thoughts). She had the unconcern of the woman who is sure of her man, who knows she needn't even raise an eyebrow. Roberta never gave herself any unnecessary trouble, and to Caryl this evening that little air of quiet about her was deadly. More, it was insolent—as though she said, "You will observe I don't even have to change my frock or powder my nose. . . ."

And poor Caryl had done both—had put on her nicest frock and borrowed some of Pen's powder. . . .

Over coffee the talk turned for an instant upon a story of Guen's in the current *Miscellany*. Even John Suffield was moved to express admiration of the way it was done. As a story it disturbed him, but less than it would have disturbed him a few months ago. "You know," he said now to Allan, "I don't see how we can afford this new world you and Guen are after."

"But do you think," Allan asked him, "that we can really afford the old one—this world we've got?"

It was then that Roberta looked up from a contemplative stirring of her coffee.

"I wish someone'd tell me," she said, "what really happened at the end of Guen's story."

"Read it for yourself," said Allan bluntly.

"But I have," said Roberta. "Honestly . . . I've read the ending twice and I don't understand it a scrap."

So they told her, and Roberta said prettily, "Thanks . . . it must be awfully nice to have brains. . . ."

Allan frowned, but Caryl didn't see that. She only saw Dick's smile and that look which passed between her father and Pen's Tom. Her nerves, already stretched and strained, snapped suddenly.

"I don't see," she said, "why men always wear that look of gratification when a woman confesses she's a fool."

And Caryl rose and walked out into the garden.

5

Nobody followed her. She walked to the bottom of the garden and sat down beneath September's yellow moon.

"I can't bear it . . . I just can't!" she said, her hands clasped in an agony of misery and her head bowed over them.

Yet presently—within that high-walled garden fragrant with the scent of late roses and of early asters, where already summer seemed folded like a memory against earth's heart, where no wind or living thing stirred—her misery stole out from her as the sea from a moon-kissed shore. A world unseen, unguessed at, drew near and blessed her. It ceased to matter so dreadfully what happened to her. There were things that remained—things that nobody could touch. Out of the delicate dark a laughing face came swimming . . . and Jan's voice . . . "Oh, *you!* You'd think it a privilege to break a front tooth!"

Jan had understood—had known she was like that, perhaps because he was like it himself as well. He, too, loved living, loved life that had served him so scurvily. That phrase of his would go down with her to the grave. . . .

She was young and she wanted to live. No one ever wanted it as she wanted it. She wanted to live, whatever the years had to offer her.

"I want to stay," she said, "until I'm burned out."

Nothing mattered—nothing in all the world save the fate that had overtaken Jan—to die before you were old, before you had lived, actually, at all. . . .

CHAPTER NINE

1

NOT that the miseries—the vague blur of unhappiness—did not come back. But at least that little bit of knowledge, that hidden pool of impregnable quiet, helped her to keep her secret. Nobody guessed but Pen, and Pen only guessed enough for vague disapproval: even she did not believe there was “anything in it—really,” only even the most harmless of philandering was not the sort of quality any sensible woman encouraged in the man she was going to marry. But Caryl wasn’t sensible. Caryl was an idea-d little idiot, full of theories that wouldn’t work, that in this world never would work. . . . All the same, Pen saw—she could not help seeing—that Caryl no longer went to Meldon Avenue. Others saw it too: but found in Caryl’s studies for her Final reason enough. Only Pen (clever at nothing but the reading of men and women) saw down beneath the veneer of that affability Caryl showed towards Roberta whenever she came to Adelaide Lodge; read aright the signs of Caryl’s distress when Dick and Roberta were both at the house, and made no mistake over that evening when Caryl rapped out her snub and walked out into the garden. She saw that Caryl, for all her talk, was less brave than her ideas. She suffered, but she suffered in silence. You couldn’t, try as you might, get anything out of Caryl. She went to her lectures and returned from them; her mind centred, to all outward seeming, upon the thesis with which she hoped in the next year to take her M.A. Her Honours degree in Pure Mathematics had been an achievement, and Anne Suf-field thought she had overdone it. “Poor child!” she said that night when Caryl had snubbed Roberta, “so unlike Caryl. I’m sure she’s working too hard!”

But it wasn’t her M.A. thesis which was wearing her out half so much as this problem of Roberta and Dick, from which she could never escape and the answer to which eluded her.

Withdrawn, aloof, she looked at it steadily: approached it by different methods and still arrived at no solution. Roberta's part in it baffled her utterly. The things she knew of Roberta and still more the things she didn't know, the things she was quite hopelessly wrong about, did not tend in the least to simplify the problem. At the most, she felt, Roberta was only amusing herself, finding Dick useful, filling up the gaps. . . . Yet if you admitted that you had also to admit something else: you had to admit that Roberta would undoubtedly be worried by this passion of feeling she'd inadvertently called into being, not only because of Caryl (and Caryl thought she *would* care something for that), but because Roberta had told her so often how it distressed her when men lost their heads about her. (They did it frequently: "If I were a man," Caryl used to think, "I'd do it, too!") You had, no doubt at all about it, Caryl reasoned, to acquit Roberta of *malice prepense*: she was vain and fond of flattery—even Caryl, not at all good at psychology, saw that—and she always let a situation get beyond her in a fashion that argued stupidity. All those cases of all those other men. Roberta had never known in time what was happening: had always "let herself in" for things. She hadn't known—she never would know—what to do with passion, with this thing of the depths her beauty plucked out of men! She'd find it always a thing of vast inconvenience, but it wouldn't be Roberta who would be scorched. She'd merely withdraw herself from the flame, delicately revolted, more convinced than ever of her own essential delicacy and the incurable, never-ending beastliness of the world she lived in.

Any fleeting doubt that might have come to Caryl as to Roberta's indifference was disposed of not only by Roberta's own disclaimers ("It's not my fault. . . . I don't want him hanging about. . . . Really, Caryl, I haven't encouraged him!"), but by Allan's attitude when Pen had finished with him. Pen had said outrageous things to Allan, and he had remained calm. That, somehow, did seem to settle it, because you couldn't help feeling Allan *knew*. He had seen the lighting of all those other candles and their extinguishing. Always the altar had remained beautiful, bare of sacrifice. Oh, yes, Allan knew: he was used to men making fools of themselves over Roberta.

Yet, though Roberta was thus far absolved, Caryl could not

find it in her heart to go to see her. That avalanche of disgust which had swept down upon her when she realised she'd been going to Meldon Avenue merely to "keep an eye" on Roberta was still making that impossible. But it was not Roberta's part in this *contretemps* that really worried her. It wasn't Roberta she blamed if, indeed, she blamed anybody—and perhaps she didn't. Nor was it really Roberta's fate which interested her, for even Caryl sensed vaguely that Roberta's capacity for suffering was not overwhelming. Just that delicate withdrawal, that folding of herself away . . . little more. The person who would suffer—was suffering—was Dick (she omitted herself because her suffering was so utterly bound up with his), and, whatever Roberta was doing, Dick was certainly not "amusing" himself. This feeling he had for Roberta was horribly real, and Caryl was far from despising it because she knew it for so utterly a thing of the senses. She saw that, indeed, as the one piece of brightness in her dark cloud, for she did not believe that a thing so entirely physical could possibly last. She believed—and her faith was the rock to which she clung in a raging sea—that presently Dick's intellectual disapproval would turn and stamp upon it: that all she had to do was to sit still, to pretend that she saw less than she did, that she suffered less. . . .

Only that, with Dick, was a thing horribly difficult to keep up. Easier with anybody than with Dick . . . who only made her realise how impossible it was to wear a mask before one for whom all masks had for so long been doffed. There were dreadful occasions during those early September days when she didn't "keep it up" at all, when she stopped being aware of Dick's pain, perceiving only her own. That was the unforgivable sin—to show what *you* were enduring. As though, here, *you* mattered. . . .

It happened once when Dick came complaining that Roberta had "turned him down"—she did it often these days. . . . ("Sending him back to you," Roberta had called it, hadn't she, to Caryl?) And suddenly the armour in which Caryl had come clad to the interview slipped from her. The sword ran home.

"Oh, why, why do you *tell* me?" she said. It was somehow outrageous that he should: that his own sense of dignity didn't prevent it. And it didn't.

"I must," Dick said; "it's a sort of penance. . . ."

"But it's *I, I*, who do the penance," groaned Caryl, forgetting that she had said once, "I must *know* . . . whatever happens, I must *know*!"

She saw now that he didn't understand, that he thought she was hurt because Roberta had had to remind him that he was engaged to Caryl, had "sent him back" to her. And it wasn't that; at least, it wasn't that which had stripped her of her armour, but only this outrageous sense of pity which assailed her because he hadn't been able to keep from her this last revelation of his weakness. It was as though, hideously, he took some morbid delight in baring his wounds. . . . They turned her sick.

In between these miserable days came others which were not . . . days in which they believed they had forgotten and were happy. It was always Dick who knocked this precarious happiness over the head. Caryl would have forgotten if he would have allowed her.

"It's you who ought to do the turning down," he told her one day. "Why don't you chuck me, Caryl?"

She answered with averted face.

"I don't know . . . unless it's that I happen to care enough to go on."

"For how long?"

"God knows!" she said, and seas of bitterness flowed over her. "Would it be any satisfaction to you to know that you could break my heart? Is that what you want?"

"Caryl, don't. . . ."

His look of misery did not stop her. The knife was in her heart and turning all ways. She raised her chin and spoke with the calm of the dying: "You can't. You can't break my heart. Nobody can. . . . You can't, any of you, touch the real me. . . . It wouldn't kill me to know you faithless . . . more faithless than you are. . . . No, don't touch me . . . I can't bear it!" Her voice rose: the calm of the dying incontinently deserted her.

"You . . . you make me angry," she said. "I could die of shame for you. To *grovel* like this . . . before *any* girl . . . to come to me . . . *whining* about it . . . don't *touch* me, I tell you—I despise you!"

It was a scene difficult to forget, hateful to remember. And Caryl remembered it all night, and went off next morning to

a lecture on Elliptic Functions, of which she didn't hear a word. This frightened her, and she decided that there must be no more "scenes."

But there were. She was powerless, it seemed, to prevent them. There was that day, scarcely a week later, when she and Dick had gone down to Kew. . . . A miserable day it proved, forlorn and empty of hope. She was sore from a week of petty disloyalties, of shifting and lies. Dick had hardly been near her for the length of it, though he swore he hadn't been with Roberta. She didn't believe him, or perhaps she wouldn't. Was it better to believe that he'd been with Roberta than that he hadn't wanted to come to her? She had to hold on to her belief in his love for her, to her conviction that this feeling for Roberta was no more than the wind across the grass. She sat now straightly in her seat, her eyes fixed on the river, where a streak of light ran swiftly up stream, betraying the path of a water rat to the opposite bank.

"If only," she said suddenly out of a desperate silence, "if only Roberta weren't married!"

"What difference would that make?" Dick wanted to know. She looked at him. Her eyes did not waver, nor her voice. "You might be able to go and get it over!"

It was a phrase some girl in Guen's room had used long ago about the writers in some advanced quarterly, who had given their imagination rein down a disgusting thoroughfare. The girl had sounded amused, but Caryl's voice repeating her phrase this afternoon to Dick had been resonant with passionate disgust.

"Oh, I can't talk about it!" she said. "But anything would be better than this . . . anything in the world."

Her voice broke. She sat quite still, unspeakably wretched, staring down at her hands, her level brows drawn together.

It was a beautiful afternoon, clad in soft lights and shades, in primrose and pearl and grey. Dick and she were sitting on a seat on the very edge of the Gardens, in a quiet spot by the river where it swung past the curve of the grounds. Nothing and nobody was there to disturb them save the quiet beauty of the day that mocked their own lack of tranquillity. Suddenly Dick moved up to her and took her unresisting hands in his.

"You blessed infant," he said, "you don't know what you're talking about."

The quick tears came into her eyes.

"I do," she said. "I know a lot more than you think."

"You mean, you'd marry me . . . afterwards?"

The tears in her eyes welled over and flowed down her face. She made a pitiful effort to control them, gave it up, struggled to free her hands, gave that up, too, and turned her head away.

"I don't know," she said, "I don't know." The tears rolled down and down her face. "If anyone should see us!" Dick thought; and then, "Oh, damn! what the hell does it matter?" She looked, he thought, such a baby. Torn with pity, he was torn also with anger against her because she let him see how much he was making her suffer, against himself because he could neither give her up nor keep away from Roberta. All that was best in him wanted Caryl: but some little bit of him (much stronger, somehow, than all the rest) wanted Roberta.

"Darling," he said, "don't cry. I'm not worth it."

He knew he wasn't, and yet it pleased him to hear himself say so. And Caryl, as if she knew that, went on with her crying. He would have drawn her to him, but she resisted. That hurt.

"You see," he said, "you can't any longer bear me to touch you."

She conquered her nerves with an effort, let him put an arm round her.

"It isn't what you *do* that hurts," she said presently. "It's what you *want* to do. . . ."

"But I *don't* want. . . . Good God, I tell you I don't care tuppence for Roberta! The only person I care about is you. It always was you . . . even when you were doing your best to make it Marjorie."

She said, presently, "Yes, but it isn't *all* me. If you cared as I do there wouldn't be room for anybody else."

"There isn't. Berta's an intruder . . . an interloper."

"I know, but you can't turn her out."

"Not yet."

Silence after that and the mist coming up and Caryl's white face rising palely out of it. "Not yet. . . ." How long, oh Lord, how long?

With unintentional humour came the cry of the keepers, calling time. They rose and walked on towards one of the Kew Road gates. They went out silently, and all the time the sword twisted in Caryl's heart.

Faithfulness!—not only physical, but mental and moral. That was what she wanted, and she wasn't going to get it. But how many women did? "You're very young, you know," a girl at King's had said to her once, "if you don't know that faithfulness is the one thing a woman never gets from a man. There are women who think they do . . . who like to think it. I'm not such a fool. I merely face facts."

So Caryl "faced facts" all the way home on the top of the Highgate bus, and profoundly miserable the proceeding made her.

2

If only they could have got away from Roberta and not have talked so much about her! If only she hadn't been there, everlastingly, as a shadowy third, they could even then have snatched some semblance of happiness from their hours together. But she always was, and, strangely enough, it was Dick's fault and not Caryl's that they so seldom escaped her. Even now there were days when Caryl could have cheated herself into believing that the incidents which disturbed her were trivial and did not matter, if Dick had not persisted in his dreary penance until she wanted to shriek. Only by erecting the wall of her reserve could she at all these days avoid "scenes." Instinctively she guarded her soul, that pool of impregnable quiet, against intrusion. Love wasn't all: she still believed it, and yet it didn't help her. . . . Gradually her unhappiness ceased to be a vague blur and became a hideous definiteness that was like a steel trap cutting the deeper into her the more she struggled to escape. She could, she thought, have stood it if Roberta had held him by any other thread or by more than that one of physical intoxication: if he could have equipped his passion with some element of greatness: if it hadn't been possible for him to say, "I don't care tuppence about Roberta. . . . I despise her! The feeling I have for her is like the measles!" Because one wasn't a nice object when one had the measles and to discuss your symptoms was disgusting.

When she couldn't shut the door of her work upon her thoughts she found they had a way of besieging her. She went over things, sorting, explaining, accusing, until her head reeled and ached.

"If only he wouldn't tell me," she said to herself, "I'd forget . . . at least, I shouldn't remember all the time. If only he'd be quiet I wouldn't look. . . ."

And she couldn't bear to look. Her instinct was to turn her head away as she had wanted to do when she saw Mr. Masefield's *Nan*. That love-scene between Dick and Nan when he takes the pins out of her hair had struck her with crude horror. She couldn't bear to look. To depict on the stage things you'd instinctively look away from in real life was bad art, Guen had said afterwards. "The essence of a love-scene is what you leave out." And being Guen, she had forborne to add: "I told you you wouldn't be able to bear it."

But Dick left nothing out: spared neither himself nor her. And Caryl, all the time holding fast to her one conviction, reminded herself that Roberta didn't matter. That she didn't matter and never would. . . . She held on to it with the desperation of the woman who knows that when that is gone there is simply nothing else. Whatever happened, Roberta didn't matter. Surely there ought to have been more consolation in the thought than there was. Even Dick knew it was true.

"I wouldn't really care," he said, "if I never saw her again. Yet she's like a magnet: as long as I know she's there—in that little messy house" (messier than ever it was, these days) "I have to go. And seeing her's the devil! . . . It's so . . . so futile . . . we haven't anything to talk about and, besides, it annoys her . . . my turning up unexpectedly, I mean. I make myself a nuisance: she reminds me that she has other friends. . . . It isn't a dignified figure I cut, Caryl, if it's any consolation to you to know that."

"It isn't," said Caryl. Nothing was.

"And there's another thing. You were all wrong about her being unhappy. That's rot . . . she's merely discontented. It isn't the Revolutionary's fault they don't get on. . . . I'll say that for him. His only fault is that he hasn't enough money. Pots of money, and she'd be happy anywhere, with anybody. Not that she'll ever know what happiness is, or unhappiness . . . she exists on some miserable middle plane. . . . I want to push her off it . . . violently, so that it hurts. But you can't hurt her. She has the supreme gift of hurting other people while remaining untouched herself. . . . She doesn't care for me . . . but I flatter her vanity and she finds me

useful. . . . That's the feeling I have about it all the time . . . that she's using me. God only knows why. And I don't care!"

"You're content to be used?" Caryl asked, trying hard to keep that high note of scorn out of her voice and not wholly succeeding.

"No, I'm not. I'm not content about anything. . . . I wish she'd run off to the Antipodes with some millionaire. . . . Good God, Caryl! Isn't it *awful* that we're sitting here talking like this?"

Caryl assented.

"Yes, it's pretty awful," she said. "We're not making a howling success of things. . . . I thought an engagement was such a glorious thing." The Mute Impossible Idealist climbed up and looked despairingly out of her dark eyes. "It was, Dick, ours, wasn't it, until . . ."

"I began to play the fool? I know . . . it's all my fault. . . . Why don't you chuck me, Caryl, and have done with it?"

"I don't know," she said, and then suddenly lost courage.

"Dick . . . I can't go on like this. I just can't. Something's got to happen. . . ."

"You want to cut things?"

"Wouldn't it be best?"

"For you?"

"For both of us."

Her voice sounded scornful. It wasn't that she felt scornful, but only that she was cold and frightened, and for the moment this assumption of scorn was as a shield between them. He came closer, slipped an arm round her waist. She controlled her shivering with a mighty effort, but beneath his arm her young body was suddenly rigid and unyielding.

"Mean it?" said Dick's voice in her ear. The arm round her waist tightened: she felt his lips on her hair and, catching her breath, she drew away.

"Don't!" she said, disgust elbowing her assumption of scorn. To kiss her in that easy, intimate fashion, as though things were what they were! He left her nothing, neither her old joy, her love nor her dignity. He'd cheapened the whole universe.

"Mustn't I?" said Dick. "Do you hate me as much as all that?"

"I don't hate you . . . only, I can't bear it."

She looked woefully stricken and pathetic. Her white face

was averted, and she struggled to unfasten the grip of his fingers on her waist. Misery assailed her, for something—something vivid and unexpected, like a flash of lightning—had lit up the future, and there on the dark line of the horizon she saw nothing but suffering. And her sight to-day seemed preternaturally long.

"Dick," she said, "I can't, I simply can't bear it."

He stooped his mouth to hers, and kissed her. She did not resist and he held her close, as though he would squeeze out of her all the misery of the past six weeks, all the unhappiness that had flowed into her through the channel of her love. And she, her arms about his neck, her mouth to his, took solace for the immediate unbelievable past in the overpowering ecstasy of the moment.

It was quite true, it couldn't go on. Something had to happen. Only—what?

3

Then something did happen—something totally unexpected.

Caryl was due to spend the following week-end at Herne Bay with the Hestons, and on the Thursday evening a letter came from Marjorie putting her off. Caryl, her mind elsewhere, slipped the letter in her pocket and thought no more of it, until Dick came two hours later and said casually, "By the way, you're away, aren't you, this week-end?" "Told anybody about it?" he asked when she took out Marjorie's letter. "No? Then, I say, Caryl, don't."

"Why not?" she said, realising nothing save that she was infinitely relieved to be spared the scrutiny of Marjorie's sharp eye, the scourge of her merciless tongue. It wouldn't be easy to hide things from Marjorie. . . . "Why not?" she asked again.

"Because I want you to come and spend it with me, and they'd make a fuss here, wouldn't they, if they knew . . ."

"They couldn't object to a boarding house," Caryl said, "it's done nowadays. Even mother knows that."

"But I wasn't thinking of a boarding house," Dick said.

Caryl looked at him.

"What then?" she asked.

"There's the Cottage."

"But Mrs. Day's not there now. Father paid her off weeks ago. . . . The place is empty."

"That, rather, was my point."

The colour flamed in Caryl's face. She didn't answer.

"I see," said Dick slowly. "You're afraid. . . . You no longer trust me. . . . Six weeks ago you'd have trusted me on a desert island."

"I would now," she said. "Of course I'll come."

"But you don't want to—much?"

"More than anything else," she said. "Oh, Dick . . . more than anything else!"

"And you'll trust me to play the game?"

"Myself, too," she said.

So Caryl, with the air of a conspirator, told nobody of Marjorie's letter. It would be easy enough, on the Friday evening, to slip off as if she were going to the station. They were used to her goings and comings: nobody would want to see her off. She was not particularly in love with the rôle of conspirator, but it was the simplest way and she wanted those two days so desperately. She saw this sudden surprising venture as her one hope of getting things back. If that failed everything was over. No use whatever in trying again. . . .

So she and Dick went off for their chaperonless week-end, and from it Caryl returned on the Sunday evening with rapturous face. As she stood before her glass, beneath the eye of the Young Person Who Means To Be Happy, the door opened and Pen came in.

"I think I ought to tell you," she said at once, "that I happen to know you haven't been with Marjorie. I met her in Heath Street yesterday. She had to come home unexpectedly and had written putting you off."

Caryl looked up, brush in hand.

"Quite right," she said. "What then?"

"Nothing—except that it would be interesting to know where you have been."

"With Dick—at the Cottage."

"You little fool!" said Pen.

"I've had the loveliest time, Pen . . . and you needn't think beastly things. We aren't . . . like that."

"*You* aren't, my dear."

"Neither is Dick. . . . Horrid of you, Pen, to suggest it."



INTRUSION

317

"I don't suggest it . . . but I've eyes in my head. I can see quite well, thank you, what has been going on."

"Well, it isn't going on any longer."

"You mean—Dick's given Berta up?"

"If you *must* put it like that. . . . It never meant anything. It was just silliness, and now it's over."

"You're sure of that?"

"And Dick. We're not talking of Roberta any more. She's dropped out."

"I see," said Pen. "Well, it sounds all right."

"It is. . . . I say, Pen, don't mention this week-end, not even to Tom. (Pen always narrated the day's happenings to her husband in bed at night!) And I especially don't want mother to know. I don't think she'd understand and she might be hurt. I wouldn't like that."

Pen smiled. Justifiably, since she had just seen her mother off to an expedition into Surrey to spend the day with the woman who had been Jan's mistress.

But Caryl was beyond her smiling. She had had her fine moment, had stood looking down upon the kingdoms of the world it had revealed to her. A thing so fine, so exquisite, could never be forgotten or destroyed. It would go with you through life and on out into the darkness that was death.

CHAPTER TEN

1

OTHERS followed it, as September, coloured, wistful and reluctant slipped like a gold-brown bead off the string of the year. October arrived, unbelievably lovely—all summer crowded into its early days of blue skies and hot sunshine.

Dick certainly did seem to have "recovered" from Roberta. She no longer hovered, a shadowy third, between him and Caryl, who stayed in her busyness over her thesis to luxuriate in her own happiness and in this belated summer of nineteen-twenty. It had happened as she had always known it must—even down there in her pit of misery. Roberta had grown tired: was no longer intrigued by Dick. The fires of her interest had begun to burn low before ever his fan of flattery had come to rest, and now that it moved no more the flame was altogether extinguished. When you met her she seemed to spare no pains to show you the handful of ashes scattered there on the hearth. . . .

Not that the meetings were frequent, for nobody at Adelaide Lodge saw much of Roberta these days. As far as Dick was concerned it was already as if she did not exist. He never spoke of her. Only for Caryl she moved still in a delicate mist of beauty: was drawn back at intervals into her life by that remote, unreal longing after beauty which possessed her, and by a vague gratitude towards Roberta because her critically observant eyes had sharpened her own. Nowadays Caryl took longer over her dress: tried experiments in colour and style and regretted that she hadn't the sort of skin you could try experiments with. Had she possessed it she would have taken to face-creams and powders with the alacrity of a duck to water. This, certainly, was a condition of mind that needed study and yet it was, she found, extraordinarily simple. The incident with Roberta had taught her that Dick cared

enormously what a woman "looked like": that beauty appealed to him and that for this reason, though she was not beautiful she must take pains to appear so. She must achieve an effect.

So here, in the warm October weather, she was happy in the way people often are who have been desperately unhappy—as though they had snatched something out of the fire of their chastening. Something in Caryl that before had slept was now awake: some key turned, some door opened that would never shut again. Her love for Dick had shed, perhaps, something of its wonder, something of its bloom, but it had taken on some quality it had never had before. If it asked less it understood more and would give more—and differently. Caryl now could "put up" with things. And more than that it seemed as if what had happened had been necessary to produce the quiet peace that dwelt with her now. She understood, as certainly she had never understood before, that you absorbed whatever happened to you, that you couldn't sweep things aside. They went ultimately, these things you endured, to produce *you*. Here, perhaps, was the explanation of the fact that Caryl bore Roberta no grudge for the part she had played in these things which had happened to her. They had given her something she had not had before, something stabilising, indestructible. But Roberta at this stage seemed in little need of the friendship Caryl tried to renew. Always unequal, it seemed now more than a little absurd and utterly superfluous. Caryl gathered that Roberta had very many friends of her own; that she did not spend much time nowadays at Number Sixteen, which began to wear a faded second-hand air. Neither did Roberta make any secret of the fact that she and Allan were not happy together. The fiction that they were had long grown too grievous a burden to sustain. Roberta no longer cared, either way. Besides, you couldn't help seeing that she had other things to think about. . . .

"I wasn't made for this sort of life," she would say to Caryl. "This house and the beastly work gets on my nerves. Besides, Allan and I bore each other to death. I don't see why you should look so shocked, either. I don't see the use of pretending."

Difficult to say how Caryl arrived at the knowledge that Roberta resented—more bitterly than she resented anything else—Allan's insistent morality that would not give her the

opportunity of escape. Certainly Roberta never put these things into words, for her prudishness, like her beauty, remained with her yet—lone sentinels of her castle of self. There were times when Caryl, burrowing into that secret knowledge of her own, was more than a little sorry for Roberta—not alone because she was missing things, but because she was not aware she was missing them. Roberta walked uncharted through life: she had neither plan nor direction.

Or had she, now, for the first time? There was something about her to-day that didn't seem to have a name, that it wasn't possible to catch hold of and examine, but which affected Caryl every time she came to see her. She decided presently that it must be the effect of Dick's deflection. Roberta missed him, of course, even among this crowd of new friends, whose names, though she flung them at her so continually, Caryl could never remember. For after all, it was Dick, not Roberta, who had made an end of things, and to a Roberta, surely, that was the sort of thing which would matter tremendously. *She* might grow tired, but not the man. That Dick so obviously had, inverted her values and turned her silly little world topsy-turvy.

Poor Roberta, who shut the door on all the things she did not like and believed she left the world clean and beautiful thereby!—who lived on the assumption that if you pushed things far enough away they were no longer there at all.

Caryl was sorry, too, for Allan, because she thought that, loving Roberta, he must suffer. Then one day she discovered that he did not love Roberta: that he moved in the same awful bondage to her as Dick had done—that he couldn't escape. At least, not yet. But he would, of course. The people who were worth while always escaped, in the end, from that sort of thing. You couldn't make a life of that—nor of the pain it dealt you. And when Allan escaped, what then? "He'll leave her," Caryl decided. She couldn't imagine Allan going on with a thing that was meaningless, dead. Oh, he'd leave her right enough. No pity glanced back, bright-eyed, for Roberta. Caryl was so sure, somehow, that Roberta wouldn't mind . . . that even now she would herself do the leaving if she had the courage. But she hadn't. She was waiting for Allan to open the door.

And then one night at the Attic Caryl was suddenly sure of



INTRUSION

321

something else. . . . Madeleine was there when she arrived and Allan came in soon afterwards and found a seat at her side. Later the conversation drifted upon a discussion of some modern novel in which the heroine leaves her husband for another man. The ethical discussion upon which the room was embarked leaned definitely towards the view that the woman was justified. Essentially modern, they took, all of them—all who were free of religious dogma or taboo—that marriage was like any other contract: if you found it impossible to keep its conditions it might be broken. It wasn't the sort of thing they'd do, any of them, flippantly, but they wouldn't expect sane people to put obstacles in their way.

Madeleine, so far, had said nothing. And then someone appealed to her. It struck Caryl that she had purposely kept silent: that she did not want to speak and hoped the discussion would pass her by. She seemed suddenly to realise that it wasn't going to do anything of the sort: that she couldn't get out of it—whatever "it" was. Leaning slightly forward in her chair and averting her face a little from Allan (impossible to miss seeing that) she began to speak.

"I don't quite see," she said, "how it's possible to take that very definite line about it. If I say that what would be right for some people might be wrong for others you'll imagine I'm talking about the religious taboo. And I'm not. To me, it's purely a question of . . . there doesn't seem any other word—personal fastidiousness. You see, what I mean is this. This woman had no grievance against her husband: she recognises his worth and character—only, she loves somebody else."

Here somebody sitting in the shadow of A.G.'s curtain said that was just it. Somebody young, by her voice (and by what it said, Caryl would have added). "Wouldn't you say," it enquired of Madeleine, "that love is the only justification for marriage?"

"I should say," said Madeleine, "that you either believe that or you don't. This woman obviously didn't or she wouldn't have married a man she merely respected. And doesn't it, this view of things, place rather too much importance upon what we call 'love'? Surely, love of that sort comes to few people. But if you believe in it at all you ought to believe in it sufficiently to wait for it. You oughtn't to take second-best and then snatch the real best when—and

if—it comes along. We ought to pay, oughtn't we, for our own mistakes? At least, we oughtn't to make other people pay. . . . And in this case, surely, the husband did the paying. Somehow, I can't help feeling that this woman's refusal to pay her own debt soiled her. She may have been happier. . . . I'm sure she was. . . . But she was less fine. . . ."

Guen tossed a smoked cigarette into her empty fire-place and lighted another. "You mean," she said, as she tossed the match down after the dead cigarette, "that if you made a mistake—of that sort—you'd go on with it. You wouldn't . . . open the door?"

Madeleine hesitated. Caryl saw the colour come into her face as though it disturbed her to have the subject made personal in this uncompromising fashion. "I think," she said at length, "that I should want . . . a better excuse."

"He'd have to do—the husband, I mean—something that killed your respect . . . that made it impossible for you to stay? You couldn't just walk out?"

Madeleine seemed to accept this. "It might be quite all right for others," she said. "I feel sure it is. They'd feel unclean if they stopped. I should feel unclean if I went."

For a moment nobody said anything. Then Allan took the pipe out of his mouth and spoke.

"I see," he said. "Marriage for you is what Matthew Arnold said religion was—an affair of morality touched with emotion."

Madeleine turned her head and looked at him out of quiet eyes.

"I think I shouldn't say anything half as definite as all that," she told him. "It's merely my own feeling about it. I don't feel it's a question of morality in the ordinary sense at all: it is, to me, just what I said it was—a matter of personal fastidiousness. It sounds priggish, I know, but you can't say what you mean in English. . . . It just is that there are some things you know you can't do. They revolt you—like certain things to eat or the feel of a cat's fur."

Why was it that to Caryl it was as if she uttered an ultimatum, as though she gave Allan a Roland for his Oliver in making the discussion personal in the way he had?



INTRUSION

323

2

Later, after Caryl had gone, Madeleine went outside on to the verandah. The dropping of A.G.'s bright chintz curtain behind her seemed to leave her free and isolated: she gave a sigh of relief and stood there, her hands on the cold rail of the balcony, her eyes on the maze of London roofs. Seen from that height, the lights of the city were shorn of their blatancy: line after line of them, like the white stones of the coastguards on the green cliffs, they marked out the plan of the winding streets. Every now and then, coming away sharply from the general buzz and with the keenness of a pistol shot, some sound arrested her—the sharp ping-ping of the bell in a shop down in one of the streets immediately below; an angry voice, a sudden cry or a shrill laugh—all rising out of the very heart of the short vigil which night keeps with humanity.

A step sounded on the stone and turning she found that Allan, too, had passed beyond the barrier of A.G.'s gay curtain. He came to her side and stood there looking down and around.

"How clear the lights are," he said presently, "that shows how humid the atmosphere is."

She murmured, "Does it?" and held a little tighter to her rail. She was white and cold, like still waters under an October moon. Allan moved nearer and put a hand on hers.

"Madeleine—you meant all that in there, or were you just talking?"

She turned her head and looked at him.

"I know," he said, "you never 'just talk.' So it was, in its way, of course, an ultimatum—to me. You wanted me to understand?"

Her affection for him, always inarticulate, was inarticulate still; but out there beneath a quiet sky it was as if the veil for one moment was torn down. They saw just where they stood and what, between them, they had managed to miss. Time dissolved. Nothing had ever happened or could ever happen. There was nothing in the world at all save that instant of comprehension. It was as if in it they had both just been born and had died.

"We'd better go in," she said, and turned to do it, just as A.G. lifted the curtain and his voice adjured them to come in and be sociable.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

1

IN the days that immediately followed Allan stood away from life, striving to see things as they were, as they must be, for Roberta, for him and for Madeleine.

For Roberta they seemed pleasant enough. She spent a good deal of time, these days, away from home, shedding the light of her beauty upon Tommy Carew and her friends at Pangbourne. She wouldn't go there many more times that year, for the Indian summer was already at its end. A hint of fog now in the air, frost in the mornings and at nightfall. Tommy would be driven by them back to town. Allan, however, was not interested in Miss Carew's movements and had long ago given up trying to control Roberta's. Her life to him was vague, incomprehensible: it didn't matter. He had got used to living comfortably without her and was grateful to her for living so comfortably without him, for leaving him alone. It was only so they could make anything at all of this bargain they'd made with life. If Roberta had made scenes Allan could not have borne it. But she didn't: she had no temperament for scenes and loved comfort too well. You had at least to give her credit for that vague valueless amiability she carried about with her. She did not reproach him hysterically for the dullness of her life—perhaps even Roberta knew it was scarcely his fault. She went out and found a queer happiness of her own. At least, Allan supposed you had to call it happiness.

Anyway, he left her to it. He had given her up. At some point the shackles had broken: the pachyderm hardened and thickened. He saw less and less that this girl he had married was beautiful and only that she was vain and empty. He had seen that many times before, but never without that halo of beauty. Now it stood stark, not to be missed or qualified. When she was there before his eyes her beauty no longer put

out fingers and touched him: but sometimes, when she was not there, when he sat quietly at his work, some memory would come creeping out at him—some memory of the white curve of a shoulder, a backward tantalising glance, or the flame of her hair beneath a street lamp. Her beauty belonged to her still. You couldn't take that away from her, but it moved him now not to passion but regret. It was ranged with the things that were dead, with the things that had promised so much and proved so empty. Strange how it had shrouded the petty soul, kept him for so long from separating her beauty from her paltriness. But to that moment when Allan had succeeded in tearing them apart—not for a second, but irrevocably, so that apart they must remain for ever—belonged the beginning of that subduing of his longing for her. To-day—and he realised it with a shock, half triumph, half bitterness—there was nothing left of his passion for her save those faint fingers of beauty remembered stealing out after him in the quiet dark. . . .

He no longer wanted her, and he found it no longer troubled him to remember that there were other men who might, that among Tommy Carew's queer collection of invertebrates there were probably men who flattered her to her bent.

Even to himself, however, his detachment was extraordinary. It seemed incredible that he had ever cared as he had or incredible that he felt as he felt now. . . . It was like moving in a dream. Things happened inconsequently, for no reason at all. And yet though he had always known that it must happen like this: that always there had been the end in sight though shrouded by the mist of his own passion, he was conscious now of an overpowering sense of impotence. He could escape—but escape no longer mattered. So far as he could he had already excluded her. She had no part anywhere in his life and he had locked his study door against her so that her desultory tidying-up should not disturb his work. And the tidying-up was very desultory indeed. Roberta was ceasing to take even superficial pains with her house: it wore, sadly, a mingled air of neglect and pathos, as though it realised its shortcomings, but was prepared to do better for them with a little encouragement. In the spring, if they were to go on living there, Allan supposed the house would have to be done up. But he hated it, not because of its shabbiness, its air of

wilting under Roberta's indifference and his own scorn, but because it harboured memories of all the things that had happened to him. He hated the rooms in which he had loved and despaired: they seemed to be permeated with the very essence of his bitter humiliation. He hated them as you hate rooms in which you've been ill, in which you've stared through heavy lids at pain and death. . . .

Nevertheless, here in this little house, poky, neglected, untidy, ridiculously like a wooden box, he must stay. With Roberta. Later he might exchange the box, but Roberta would still be there, as she'd been all the time. He'd never be really free of her. He knew that; even though he saw with a hideous clarity of vision that there was simply no reason at all why this thing should go on. She'd cheated him of most of the things he wanted and now he no longer wanted anything of her at all. There was nothing binding them together—no living child, no memory of the child who was dead. Neither did Allan imagine for a moment that a child could have done anything for them—have drawn them together. Children could only have made matters worse. How they would have quarrelled over any child they might have had! The imagination boggled at the thought of Roberta as a mother.

Nothing held them. He could escape to-morrow if he liked—if escape were the only thing that mattered.

2

And it wasn't. He knew now that all the things that mattered were shut away behind Madeleine's quiet eyes, behind the phrases that had assailed him as an ultimatum. He had nothing, there, to hope for. "Happier but less fine. . . ." "We ought to pay for our mistakes. . . ." He saw her standing there at the bar of her own judgment and knew that he agreed with her verdict. It never occurred to him to argue about it. It wasn't, anyway, the sort of thing you could argue about. . . . Either you were like that, saw the thing like that, or you weren't, you didn't. . . . You couldn't get away from it. Allan made no attempt to get away from it. He did not try to see Madeleine. Whenever he faltered he remembered that look on her face in that one moment when time and space had dissolved. It was all he was to have, that moment: he

daren't spoil it. The door of the future was locked: the key in Madeleine's hands. There was to be no To-morrow. There was only To-day—and a something already strangely vague and blurred called Yesterday, into which he had poured all his hopes and emotions.

And even in the dull dead level of To-day Madeleine had no share. He had to learn, somehow, to do without her—as she had learned, long ago, to do without him. He knew now that he was not essential to her happiness, that she had made life stand and deliver . . . had secured something satisfying. God alone knew what or how. Allan only knew that he had nothing—that he never would have anything. . . .

3

Yet, as the autumn drew to its close, he was not entirely unhappy, or even unhappy at all. His work interested him and there was a good deal of it. It did not leave him over-much time for thought—of Yesterday or of To-morrow. He came also to be grateful for two things—that Roberta's queer friends asked her so frequently to stay with them, and that when Guen came she asked no questions, never showed that she saw anything at all. Even now, it seemed, she folded her hands, quiescent, before this fact of Allan's disastrous marriage. It was as though she saw they were bound as ever, she and Allan, by the cords of their own futility, as though she said: "We won't talk about it. Words, words, words. . . . What did they ever do for us?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

1

THERE seemed no reason why things should not go on like this for ever. Allan was not likely to complain. He'd made a mess of things and he couldn't turn his back upon it. He wasn't the first man who'd bungled this business of marriage and he certainly wasn't going to be crushed by it. He had slammed the door on ecstasy and on despair, and he thought, "If I'm not to know what love is, at least I know what it is not. It was worth suffering to have learnt that."

He saw little of Roberta throughout October. Almost invariably when he came home she was seeking amusement elsewhere, but she always returned in respectable time and amiably enough. Allan saw that if he left her alone he'd have peace. He left her alone.

Week-ends were the worst, and he thanked Heaven that Tommy Carew remained at Pangbourne, fog or no fog, and continued to ask her down there. He was bored by her recital of adventures and was glad when Caryl sometimes looked in to listen to them and he might escape.

But Caryl's visits these days were not too frequent: she was divided alternately between her work and Dick; but when she came to Meldon Avenue she was always alone. As far as Allan knew Roberta and Dick had not met for weeks. Of *course* there had never been anything in that. Hadn't he always known Pen was on the wrong track?

Caryl, these days, was a cheerful person. The tense strung-up note about her had gone, and Allan envied her, as he had envied her before, her trick of happiness.

It was at the beginning of November that Roberta went down to Pangbourne for her final week-end. (Tommy, she said, "fed up with the fog," was coming back to her flat in the following week.) It happened, too, that Dick was at Read-

ing that week-end, and Caryl turned up after lunch to reproach Allan for not having come around to Adelaide Lodge for the meal and to get him to take her and Leader for a walk. She'd been bored to death, she explained, by the household that day. Her father and mother had gone down into Surrey to visit somebody or other (somebody Jan used to know. Did Allan know who it was and why this horrible secrecy?) and Tom and Pen together were a little too much for Caryl. She'd got up at five to work and had taken Master Jan out until lunch, but that young man was now sleeping and it was dull work listening to Tom and Pen on the prospect of Master Jan's baby-sister, who was to make her appearance in the spring.

"It's all very fine," Caryl sat on the edge of Allan's table and complained, "but really they do rather overdo it. Tom insists upon treating Pen like an invalid: anybody'd think she was in danger of expiring at any moment in dreadful torment before his eyes. This view of a wife as an actual or potential invalid is depressing, you know, old thing. If I may say so, you were a jolly sight more sensible over Roberta's little affair. . . ."

"I'm glad I pleased you," Allan said, looking up from the article he'd said he must finish before he took Caryl out. "I know you want to let off steam, but do hold it in for five minutes. All the words I can think of are adjectives, and I've a prejudice in favour of one noun and one verb at least in a sentence. There are some cigarettes on the mantelpiece. Go and help yourself."

Discovering the cigarettes Caryl discovered also the dust. "Inches of it!" she said, "everywhere!"

Allan apologised. Roberta didn't care for dusting, and in any case he didn't care for Roberta's interpretation of the word—flicking the dust from one place to another. "Besides," he said, "she forgets all about it, and when she remembers and arrives with the necessary implement I've got quite used to the dust—at least I prefer it where it is."

Caryl let him finish his article and she coaxed Leader into doing it too. For Leader, who understood not only English but French and German as well, and from whom the word "walk" could not be disguised, was thoroughly well aware that this trot from house to house was only a pleasant prelude to a real outing upon the Heath. Presently, when Allan laid

down his pen, Caryl went out and found a cloth with which she removed the dust from the furniture, whilst an agitated Leader informed her she was wasting much precious time, and Allan put on his boots.

Ready first, she pulled back Roberta's dirty curtains, which that young woman kept flatly spread across the window, and looked out. The quiet suburban road was deserted: nobody else seemed smitten with this desire to walk. Nothing whatever to see save a row of tiny houses in the grip of Sunday, and winter jasmine climbing like yellow stars over the one immediately opposite. From the clipped suburban trees the coloured leaves dropped straightly to the ground. There was no wind. *Where the dead leaf fell there did it rest.* Almost as if she had been Guen that line from Keats jumped out at her and fixed the picture. A melancholy young man, Keats, his mind full of nice thoughts about death and pain, but he'd written lines that you couldn't forget. . . . And that yellow jasmine!—how nice of those people opposite to have planted it.

When Allan came down they locked up the little wooden box and went out on to the Heath. Allan hated the time of the year, hated to see the months, growing wan and cold in autumn's diaphanous robe, slipping one by one into the lap of winter: and he, too, was grateful to the people who'd had the foresight to plant the winter jasmine.

It was dark when they got back: the early stars gleamed coldly through the branches of the trees: the sky had the quiet of the windless day. On the still moist air were borne the floating scents of autumn: one did not admit, yet, that it was winter.

Indoors was a bright fire—bright enough for toast, and while Caryl was making it Allan found cups and saucers in the kitchen and put on a kettle to boil. Leader, who loved a fire, scorched his nose against a very hot fender and retired, looking chagrined.

Caryl laughed.

"Do you remember how he used to sit by Alice while she did the grate in the morning?" she asked Allan who came in just then with his tray. "And how you used to say that in his doggie mind you were sure he called Alice Prometheus?"

Allan laughed.

"Good Lord, yes! How long ago that seems!"

Caryl turned back to her toast. Allan, watching her, was struck, as he had been every time he looked at her this afternoon, by the air of quiet happiness she wore and which fitted her like a garment. He was in the mood to envy her. He supposed he'd feel like that pretty often, having made a mess of things himself. But in a sense he'd always envied Caryl: had always seen that she had something he and Guen had not. The youngest of her family by more than seven years, it was as if, in her, Nature had permitted herself a glorious finishing up, giving her the best qualities of her brothers and sisters, but toning them up, investing them with some bright quality of optimism that was allied to, not divorced from, thought, as it was in Pen and had been in Jan.

Caryl had toasted her third piece of bread and had impaled the fourth on Roberta's toasting-fork when a step came outside and the sound of a knock on the door. Leader, roused from his reverie of hot fenders, trotted off to the door, then turned to stare back at Caryl, who paused with her slice of bread in mid-air and frowned.

"Allan! A knock! Will you go?" and as he came past the half-shut door she called, "If it's Pen come to haul us off to tea, we aren't going."

But it wasn't Pen. The voice at the door was deep and gruff and it enquired for Mr. Suffield—Mr. Allan Suffield. Leader squeezed himself through the door and Caryl continued her toasting with a little wrinkling of her forehead. With vague careless curiosity she wondered who Allan's visitor might be. She hoped he wouldn't stay long. She wanted her tea.

The toast smelt good and she turned her slice, pausing once in the operation to listen, still with puzzled, frowning brows. The deep, strange voice disturbed her and she noticed that Allan didn't seem to be saying much. . . . The smell of burning toast assailed her. She had forgotten it. Mechanically she impaled another slice, held it out to the fire, then lowered it into the ashes. She looked, on the instant, alert and nervous. And the gruff voice out there at the door went on.

She realised now that she was listening—and afraid. She did not know why or of what: but as she knelt there on the hearthrug all her body was one live wire of apprehension. *She felt suddenly most horribly alone—deserted. Nothing*

kept her company but her fear and gradually that was building itself up about her like a wall. Another minute and she fled from it as from something tangible. She flew to the door, opened it and stood there, not daring to let go of the handle. But she saw now to whom the gruff voice belonged, for there at the front door stood a policeman, at whose coat tails Leader sniffed with displeasure. A policeman! For a second her mind seemed to stand still, then went on with a bound. . . . Of course. Hadn't she known it? Hadn't she *known* that gruff voice could belong to nobody else? But a policeman—at Allan's door! She stood there, staring at him, as if fascinated. When he moved she could see, just beyond his shoulder, the winter jasmine across the road, gleaming palely in the dark. She tried to say something, to call Allan, but her voice refused to obey her bidding. Leader, quite certain by now that he disliked the smell of the policeman, began to bark. . . . Allan's voice rang out with penetrating sharpness; "Shut up!" Caryl, numb with the sense of impending horror, saw the dog come instantly to heel, as if he realised that something no dog could possibly understand was happening to these people he loved. Again Caryl tried to speak and again failed. Something awful had happened—and to Dick. At least, now, she knew that. In another moment she would know what . . . but she stood there leaning weakly against the door as if she would stretch that moment of not knowing into eternity. Then with a horrible violence her voice came tearing from her.

"Allan!"

He turned and she saw his grey face. As he came towards her the protective gesture with which he put an arm about her slew her last lingering hope. She turned in his arms, hiding the white misery of her face against his coat. What he said didn't matter. *She knew*. There'd been an accident and Dick was dead!

But that wasn't the word he used. Dick wasn't dead. He was only hurt . . . Oh, why didn't Allan say it straight out? Did he think she couldn't bear it? She raised her head and stared at him. Oh, but you didn't look—like that—just because somebody was hurt. . . . Why should Allan look like that unless Dick were killed?

"You mean, he's . . . dead?" she said, and still her voice seemed to come tearing painfully out of her.

Allan shook his head.

"No," he said, "broken leg. He'll soon be all right."

Something desperate seemed to be happening to Caryl. She pushed Leader's sympathetic nose away, moved out of the circle of Allan's arms and stood there, a hand at her lips. All this for a broken leg! Had they all gone mad? She wanted to laugh. Then, suddenly, she saw that the broken leg wasn't all.

"Allan, for God's sake . . . what is it?"

But she saw that he couldn't answer, that some horrible emotion had seized him in its clutch. Something omnipotent got hold of her, steadying her. She turned to the policeman at the door.

"Please," she said, "will you tell me just what has happened?"

He told her. No emotion clutched at the policeman and he wore an air of being used to other people's. But he was mercifully brief—no fear, this time, that she wouldn't understand. He gave her the facts—a collision between a motor-car and the motor-cycle belonging to a Mr. Richard Merrick. . . . The people in the motor had escaped with shock and bruises, but the motor-cycle and sidecar had overturned. Mr. Merrick had sustained a broken leg: he'd be all right in a few weeks, but the young lady, the policeman regretted to say . . . the young lady was dead when they picked her up.

"The . . . young lady?" said Caryl, black waters all about her.

"Name of Suffield, Miss. . . . This gentleman's wife, I understand."

The black waters receded. Caryl's own unbelievable calm dammed them up.

"Will you tell me, please, where the accident happened?"

"Ten minutes' run out of Wokingham village. . . ."

"They had been staying there?"

"Place called the Cottage. . . ."

Those three names rang in her ears. They'd do it, surely, till she died. Wokingham . . . Reading . . . Pangbourne. . . . Dick had been at Reading, Roberta at Pangbourne. So they had believed. . . . And they hadn't been. They'd been there

together at Wokingham . . . at *her* cottage, where lately she'd been so happy.

Extraordinary how the mind boggled at a fact like that. It simply couldn't be true. This sort of thing didn't happen . . . at least it didn't happen to *you*. . . .

Presently somebody must have shut the door. The policeman had gone.

2

If they hadn't chosen the Cottage she thought it might not have hurt quite so much. "He might have spared me *that!*" she said. It was all she did say, sitting there in Roberta's little dining-room where still there lingered the smell of burnt toast. There wasn't anything to say: it wasn't a thing you could talk about: but you'd see it for ever—a dark smear across the pageantry of life. . . .

For ever. Caryl turned her head in dumb misery against her cushion, as though she couldn't bear it, and something in her face, when presently Allan found courage to turn and look at her, snapped the thread of his own misery so that he could think of nothing but her and her suffering.

He saw that it was profound: that it wrapped her round like a ring of flame. She was beyond words: beyond tears. She looked as though, very slowly, she was being burned alive.



EPILOGUE

AN intrusion, Guen called it, writing five weeks later to Madeleine, something that came soiling the clean surface of life, smudging its pattern. . . .

Already (she wrote) it's a little difficult to believe it has really happened. It isn't possible, somehow, that *this* has happened to *us*. Or is it that Roberta doesn't matter . . . that she really doesn't, *even now*; that she was herself so trivial that nothing that has happened through her can affect us—much, or for long? I'd believe that, I think, but for Caryl. Caryl cuts clean across all the theories and consolations one builds up for oneself. . . .

It must have been instantaneous, Roberta's death, for she was dead when they picked her up. Though her neck was broken, her face was untouched. She couldn't even have seen Death coming. . . . She took her beauty, unimpaired, to the grave, as though even Death knew what would please her most.

But to die like that, with all your littlenesses and deceits upon you! Nothing, surely, can atone for that? For the littlenesses and deceits were there, like her beauty, to the end—and as much a part of her. Even Death, I suppose, couldn't separate them.

Caryl threw the story at me . . . that Sunday evening . . . the story of Dick's infatuation. She'd been through a bad time with him, had come to the end of her tether, and then, suddenly, Dick had "recovered." She sticks to it still that he had, taking Dick's word for it, bending her head before what he has since called that "moment of temptation." The nearness of Reading and Pangbourne, she said, had never worried her. . . . She offers it, the poor child, as proof of her faith in

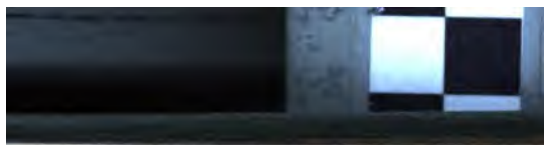
his "recovery." And then, on the Sunday, that story . . . that pitched her faith, like her happiness, in the dust. Dick *hadn't* "recovered." He'd been week-ending there at the Cottage with Roberta and Roberta . . . was dead.

That was how Caryl and Allan had it—like a smack in the face. When Tony and I got there at midnight she was quiet. She'd been like that all the time, Allan said. Not frozen, not stunned: she wasn't missing any of the pain. It was as though her misery were an inward flame, consuming her. Allan's phrase gives it you. "I can't stand it," he said, "she looks as though she's being burnt alive!"

She did. She went on looking like it for days. . . . And Roberta's letter, confirming Sunday evening's story, wasn't likely to help her. Roberta must have posted it just before she set out for that last ride, with Death lurking, deliberative, in the shadows. ("Oh, I'll leave you your beauty, never fear!") Roberta-ish, that letter—pure unadulterated Roberta!—and she offered it to Allan as documentary proof of her "unfaithfulness." She wrote it with her eye on the Courts: stated in her bald, not too-grammatical way that she'd not spent that week-end at Pangbourne at all, but at the Cottage with Dick. Allan had his remedy: would he please take it? And at the end a still more Roberta-ish touch . . . that suggestion of herself as a delicate creature in an indelicate world. Of course she did not love Dick and nothing would induce her to marry him. But Dick was in love with her . . . and the law wouldn't let people be decent. *Voilà!* If Allan wasn't gentleman enough. . . . In short, she wanted her freedom and meant to have it. I try not to suspect some rich, not too particular *parti* in the background. . . .

And this precious document Allan must needs show Caryl. "She's got to know," he said. Reading it Caryl broke down. When her wild fit of crying was done she said she must see Dick. It wasn't possible, the hospital people said, and talked about a dangerous temperature. It wasn't possible for a week and for a whole week Caryl went on living with that story. . . .

In between came the inquest. Astonishing, there, what we did with the story. . . . It emerged a decent casual affair, with tragedy running out at it . . . clutching it by the heels. Everybody was very kind. . . . "Great sympathy was expressed for the relatives. . . ." I wanted to go somewhere and shriek.



INTRUSION

337

We buried Roberta (how she would have enjoyed her own funeral and the interest it aroused!) and two days later Caryl sat by Dick's bedside and learned that the letter she had written to Allan wasn't true.

It simply wasn't true . . . what she'd said. Knowing Roberta, I wonder any of us ever believed it was. . . . What *was* true was that she and Dick had met—a mere chance encounter—on the Saturday in Reading: that for Dick the meeting had meant a renewal of the old passionate attraction, the sudden yielding to opportunity—or what had looked like opportunity. . . . For Roberta cheated him after all . . . as she'd always meant to cheat him. They went over together to the Cottage on the Saturday and—Roberta remained true to herself. . . .

Dick swears he didn't even sleep under the same roof: his disgust drove him out into the Berkshire lanes and woods, where he didn't sleep at all. He'd hated her all the night for having made a fool of him . . . for having, as he thought, lost courage, backed out, at the end. . . .

Then, in the morning, he saw that she *hadn't* "lost courage," that she'd never meant to yield . . . that she'd been using him. *Him!*—with all the other men she might have fooled! Or was it that she knew she couldn't—that Dick was the only man she could trust . . . who wouldn't make things unpleasant for her, keep her to her bargain? She was so certain Dick would hold his tongue: under promise, perhaps, of future favours or because she didn't believe any man would like it known that a girl had made that particular sort of fool of him.

Anyway, on the Sunday morning Dick seems to have indicated that he wasn't going to hold his tongue. . . . I gather that he lost his temper, laid hands upon her. . . . Later, she half won him by the bruises she showed him on her arms, and ultimately he relented so far as to consent to drive her back to the Carew woman's house at Pangbourne. . . . That was at half-past one. At half-past one she'd been showing him the bruises on her pretty arms . . . and at a quarter to two she was dead in the roadway. . . .

To die like that, with all one's meannesses and lies thick upon one! That's what's so shocking. There's something in that, I think, which hurts as Roberta's death itself doesn't hurt and never will. . . .

An episode, Roberta's coming and going. . . . In a way I

think I've always seen it like that, and in a way it's fitting, I suppose, that she should have provided it with so dramatic a climax. . . . How it would please her histrionic little soul if she could know how *very* dramatic it was! *De mortuis*. . . Ah, don't remind me. . . . At present there's something hard, something rebellious in me that refuses to fold quiet hands before the obliterating kindliness of that phrase.

I could forgive her if I could forget Caryl. So, perhaps, could we all. . . . Even Allan, who suffers so much less. And there isn't anything any one of us can do for her. . . . Her courage is greater than ours, and since that day at the hospital she no longer looks as though she is being burned alive. It's as though Dick's story—his contradiction of Roberta's "facts"—relieved her from some intolerable pain, stamped out the flame of despair that was eating her up and lighted that of hope. You can almost see her standing there before it, warming her hands. . . .

Do you remember how she used to say, during the war, that life went deeper than all the horror and blood . . . that down below was something fine, something indestructible? As though she seemed always to see life's smiling face beneath the trappings of woe; as, God help us, *we* never did. . . .

She's like that now: I can't pretend to know what is going to happen to her . . . or to Dick. I only see her standing there with wide eyes staring over the edge of her ruined Now into the future . . . as though she has braced her shoulders to the burden of life and found it, after all, not too heavy. She has something—as you have and mother—that Allan and I have never had; some inner knowledge and quiet that never fails her. Whatever she is, she is not futile. Life will not take and break her. Be very sure of that. Her courage is worth more to her than our happiness to us. . . . She can build anew what lies in ruins at her feet.

To-day Dick leaves England. Against everybody's advice she went yesterday to say good-bye. "Why shouldn't I?" she said. "It won't hurt me. . . . I don't believe anything will ever be able to hurt me again. . . ."

After those days, she meant, when she'd lived with the thought that Dick had belonged to Roberta.

"And when he comes back!" I said, "what then? Are you going to marry him—in the face of the family wrath?"



INTRUSION

339

"I don't know," she said, and she smiled a little—I suppose at the idea of the family wrath. Then suddenly she stopped smiling. "A year's a long time," she said.

And there she stands, looking down the vista of days. . . . The vista isn't empty, even now. . . . You can't look at her without suspecting that already hope comes riding up out of the shadows. . . .





1





DEC 24 1935

